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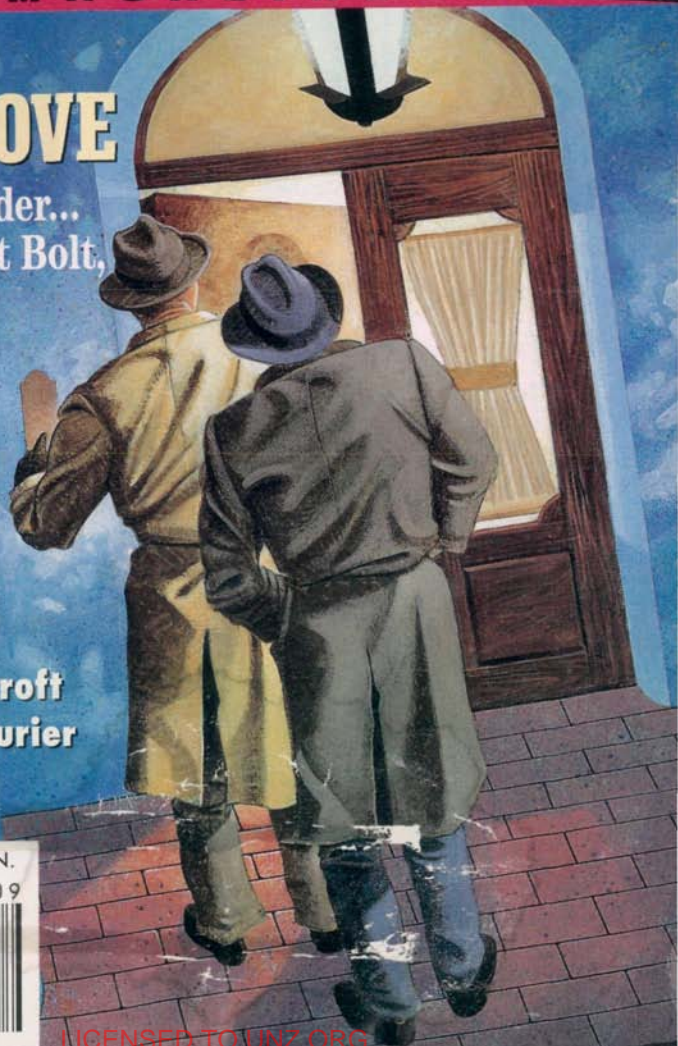
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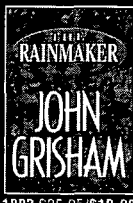
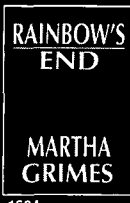
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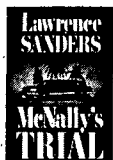
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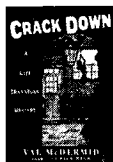
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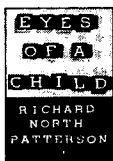
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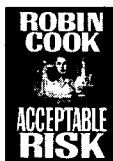
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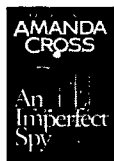
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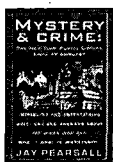
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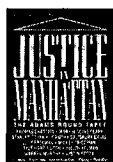
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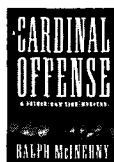
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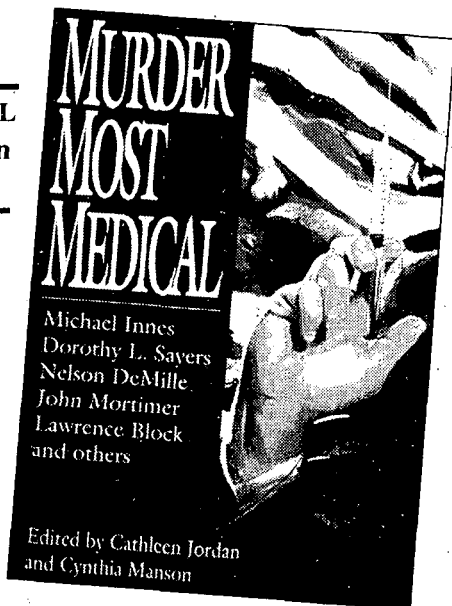


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# EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

**I**n this issue... we are pleased to bring you our first story from eminent mystery author H. R. F. Keating, best known for his novels about Inspector Ghote of the Bombay C.I.D. "Blood and Bone," however, concerns a dilemma faced by one Mr. G. R. Cann and takes place in London, Keating's home.

We are also pleased to welcome another author new to us, Cynthia Lawrence, and to welcome back Sam Pizzo.

Ms. Lawrence, author of "Chop Chop," has had a distinguished career in advertising in California and has received numerous awards for her work for such clients as Gallo, Max Factor, and Mattel. She tells us that her fiction writing career began when she started writing short stories for children as edi-

tor of the Barbie magazine for Mattel's ad agency; in the sixties these were collected in book form and published by Random House, along with a children's cookbook, as *Barbie's New York Summer*, *Barbie Solves a Mystery*, and *Barbie's Easy-as-Pie Cookbook*. In addition to three other children's books, she has written *Take-out City*, her first mystery novel for adults, published in 1993 by Carroll & Graf, and is at work on a sequel using the same protagonist, a young woman caterer.

Sam Pizzo, author of "The Stealer," returns to these pages after a hiatus of some years. "I have taken a long siesta from writing, but I'm back at it because I've accumulated a lot of pencils," he says. (We pub-

*(continued on page 149)*

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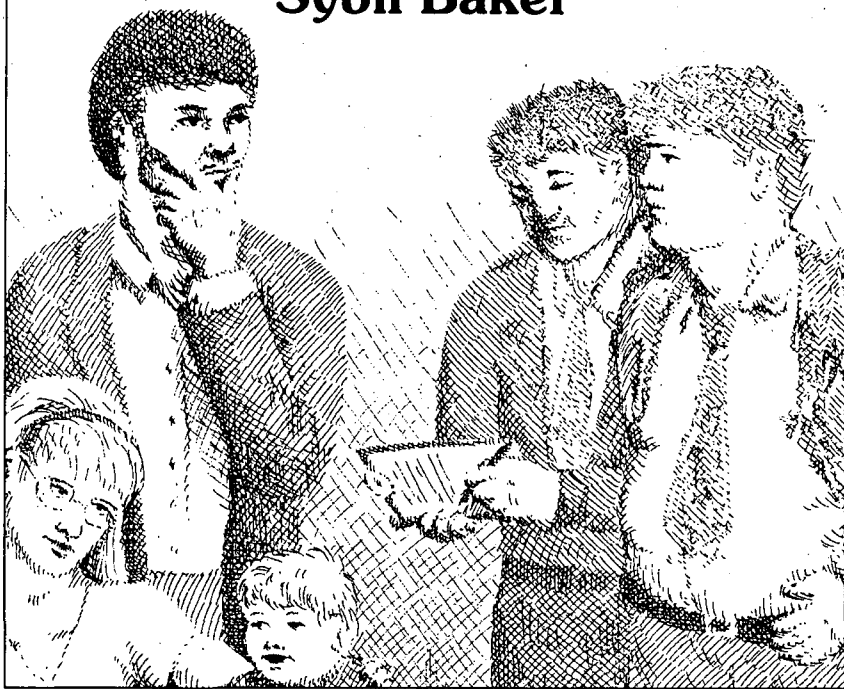
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# Lookout Ridge

## Sybil Baker



**I**t was the third Monday in July. About one P.M., the man from the San Gabriel Pool Service discovered the body of Dyna Sklary facedown next to the pool and dressed in a scanty swimsuit. A breeze ruffled the turquoise water next to her and played through her blonde hair, which fanned

out past her shoulders. Some of the hair was matted by the copious blood from the gunshot wound in her neck. There was no weapon in sight.

Dyna was short for Dynamite: a tanned and flawless beauty with a heart-stopping smile and legs as long as a young wolf's. Her real name



was Michelle, but nobody had called her that for years. At the time of her death, she was twenty. She'd left home—an unpainted shack in a small town pinched between two stone-pocked hills in New Hampshire—at fifteen, exactly as her two older sisters had done before her. She told people it was a family tradition.

A striped canvas deck chair was beside the body. On the tile next to the chair were two tall empty glasses, and under one of the chair legs, some pages that looked as if they were torn from a book. They were held together by a paper clip.

The pool man, who was stubby, timid, and confused-looking, made the sign of the cross and ran first to the adjacent house on the west, and then to the house beyond that one, where he finally found somebody at home so he could call the police.

Dozens of cops swarmed over Lookout Ridge, the affluent neighborhood where Dyna shared a house with Mike Omega. He was in Hawaii, the people across the street said. They said he'd unexpectedly left on Sunday, sometime in the afternoon. The retired couple in the house to the west of Mike and Dyna's house were also out of town—which was unfortunate, since the pool was on the

west side of Omega's house. If they'd been home, the retirees might well have heard something out of the ordinary. But the Deloraines, the two young scientists on the east side, would be home soon, neighbors told the cops. The husband was an entomologist and the wife a biologist, they said, both in their early thirties and both teachers, down at the community college.

Paul and Sarah Deloraine picked up their fourteen-month-old son at the campus daycare center and their black Labrador from a friend's house and drove home, where they learned about their neighbor's death from two detectives on their doorstep.

"Suicide?" asked Sarah in a shocked whisper.

"No, ma'am, more likely a homicide," replied Detective Todd L. Foote, handing her a card as her husband, carrying the baby, moved to her side. The time of the killing was tentatively set at between three and four the previous afternoon, Sunday afternoon, Foote said. Had they been home? They nodded, wide-eyed. Had they heard a shot?

Paul scratched under his red beard, and Sarah bit her lip. Then they looked at each other and shook their heads before

turning back to the detective, who wore a mustache as delicate as a girl's eyebrow.

The couple ushered the detectives into the kitchen and bustled around, feeding their toddler, Kyle, feeding the dog, furnishing the detectives with sodas, sharing a beer themselves, asking and answering questions. Kyle crowed as he demonstrated that he couldn't eat and hold a spoon at the same time, though he made it plain he wanted to do both.

Foote's partner seemed to take all the notes, and Foote seemed to do most of the talking. "So the uh, uh, boyfriend, uh, what's his name, an Irish name, Mike O'Mega."

"I think it's Greek," said Sarah. "No apostrophe. How awful, it's just so hard to believe. Here, sweetie." Kyle opened his mouth and grabbed the spoon.

"Apostrophe?"

"No apostrophe," said Paul, looking at Kyle and laughing. "You big cut-up! Now try the other ear, that'll taste even better. Not O'Mega, but Omega."

"Oh, I gotcha. Did they get along?"

The parents exchanged a glance; Sarah swept her long brown hair behind an ear, out of Kyle's reach. "Not really," she said. "He was old enough to be her father. Grandfather."

"Sixty-two," Paul said. He made a face. "Yeah, they had some really dumb fights." At Foote's request, he tried to recall a typical quarrel, word for word:

One morning Dyna had been outside watering the flowers, and Mike, still in his bathrobe, had come over to her and said, "Knock, knock."

"What?" said Dyna.

Mike rolled his eyes. "You're supposed to say, 'Who's there?'"

"Okay, who's there?"

"Orrin."

"What?"

He clenched his fists. "You're supposed to say *who!* Not *what!* Don't you even know enough to say 'who' in a knock-knock joke? Where you been, on Mars? Jeez, you make me so —you disgust me, you know that? You know that? You disgust me!" And he stomped off.

"Over a knock-knock joke," Sarah said. "I would have turned the hose on him."

"And he could also be, you know, affectionate with her." Paul shook his head. "He helped me out a couple of times. And Dyna was..." He sighed and shrugged.

"What?"

"She was a flirt," Sarah said, and Paul nodded.

"She even hit on me once," he said.

"She did?" Sarah looked at her husband with her mouth open. "You never told me that."

"Well, I was telling her she should go to college and all that stuff, and I asked her what her goals were, and she said her short-term goal was to get through the day, and her long term goal was to get through the night."

Sarah closed her mouth. "That was it? That was the big flirtation?"

They snickered at each other. "You should have seen her eyes," Paul said.

"I did." Her shoulders jiggled as she laughed. "When she said the same thing to the pool man."

"The pool man?" He was surprised.

"The other one, the last one, what was his name, the hunky one. Ritchie."

"Well," said Foote. "Happen to know if she liked to write?" They looked blank. "Stories? Something like that?"

They shook their heads. "She wrote me a birthday card last month," Sarah said.

"You still have it?"

Paul took Sarah's place in front of the highchair, and Sarah eventually found the card and gave it to Foote. It was obviously handmade from a standard sheet of eight by eleven inch white paper, folded

in fourths. On the front were some crudely drawn and colored roses and violets. Inside were four handwritten lines:

*Violets are blue, Roses  
are red  
Have a good birthday and  
say insted  
So what, heres another  
year  
I won't even shedd a tear.*

The detective read it twice and raised his eyebrows.

"Well, it's the thought that counts," Sarah said.

Kyle had finished eating, and they all went out onto the back porch, where wicker chairs were drawn up to a wicker table, two on each side. Beyond a short lawn were shrubs, and to the right, an oak tree shading that section of the yard. And below lay half the Los Angeles Basin.

Sarah took the baby on her lap. Paul explained that they were housesitting for their department head until September. "Our house down there would fit in this living room," he said, jerking a thumb in back of him.

"I see," Foote said. "What is Omega's line of work?"

"He's an importer," Sarah said. "Ky-uhl!" Giggling, she retrieved her glasses from the baby's fist, replaced them on her

delicate nose, and put him down. "Go read your book. Go read your flower book."

"Owah!" shouted Kyle happily and walked off, swinging his arms.

"He just learned last month," Paul said.

"To read?" the detective asked.

Sarah's giggle turned into a guffaw, and Paul threw his head back in laughter. "To walk."

Foote reddened, and Sarah tactfully changed the subject. "Mike is pretty well off. Villas in Greece and Italy, an estate in England, townhouses all over."

The detective folded his arms. "So she was a flirt. Was she fooling around?" They didn't know. "Did he want to marry her?"

Sarah said, "He told me once he'd never been married, but that Dyna might cure him of his bachelorhood."

"You're kidding!" Paul said. "Mike had been married."

"He told me he never had!"

"Why the heck would he say that? I met his ex-wife."

"Paul! What else haven't you told me lately?" She put her hands on her hips.

"It was no big deal. And I told him I wouldn't say anything, and then I forgot all about it, to tell the truth. Remember my

noontime lecture at the Beverly Hills library?"

She nodded. A few weeks ago, their car had broken down in the driveway, and Mike appeared, offering to give Paul a lift since he was headed that way, if Paul didn't mind going a little early.

"So then we pull up in a valet parking lot next to a jewelry shop on Rodeo Drive, and Mike wants me to go inside with him to help him choose a gift for Dyna." He glanced from Foote to his wife. "And hon, it was a hoot, this saleslady was so snotty to him, we left right away, and then I said outside the store, something about, you know, how rude the saleslady was. And he said, 'That was no saleslady, that was my wife.' Thirty years ago, he said; he said he almost didn't recognize her. He didn't know she was working there."

"Huh," said Foote. "But she apparently recognized *him* all right, right? I mean, that was why she was rude, right?"

"I guess."

The detective surveyed the view. "This is very helpful," he announced, and frowned when Paul couldn't remember the name of the store. Paul said maybe it would come back to him.

They were all silent a moment. "So, if the killer used a



silencer, you might not have heard a shot. And you didn't hear anything else unusual."

"Nope." Paul sounded definite. "But, of course, I was watching the game."

"Yes." Sarah nodded slowly as they all looked at her. "I heard Kyle, and I wondered who he was talking to." She explained that Kyle and she took a nap in the yard—"over there, see, in the shade of that coastal live oak?" She pointed. "He was in his playpen, it's sort of a portable mesh thing, and I'd brought a beach towel out and was telling him a story through the mesh, and we both went to sleep. But then I had to go to the john, so I went in the house, and as I was coming back, I was in the kitchen, and I heard him saying, 'Flower, flower.'"

Kyle pointed at a big bright daisy in his book and said, "Owah."

"That's right, honey bun. And then he said, 'Bye-bye,' so I went out and looked around for who he was talking to, and I didn't see anybody, but I didn't think anything of it at the time." Sarah looked scared. "Do you think he was talking to—whatever it was that did it?"

"Not necessarily," Foote said. He crossed his legs. "What time was this?"

"Quarter past three, something like that."

Kyle dropped his book, approached Foote, and solemnly examined the detective's knee. Foote looked at him as if Kyle were about to fall in love with his shin, like certain dogs that the detective had resented in the past. "Maybe he was talking to a squirrel," Foote said.

Sarah made a comical face at her husband, muttering, "With a rose in its teeth?"

"Sarah's right," Paul said. "Kyle wouldn't respond without any stimulus. He must have seen a flower, and it must have retreated. Somebody carrying it must have retreated."

The black Lab came out on the porch, lay down on her side, and closed her eyes. Kyle left the detective, found a small truck, stretched out next to the dog, and idly ran his truck over the black hill of her ribcage as she thumped her tail against the floor with her eyes still closed. Kyle's eyelids also were starting to droop.

Obviously underwhelmed at the idea of a one-year-old witness, the detectives exchanged deadpan glances. Foote rummaged in his briefcase, withdrew a photocopied set of the pages that had been under the chair leg, and asked Paul and Sarah to read it.

Wide margins surrounded the print, since the actual pages were about the size of a

paperback book, Foote said. There was a one-word title on the first page: Nema.

Here was the story.

When you first head down the trail from Lookout Ridge, the clatter and chatter from all the mansions up there still rattle in your head awhile. It doesn't help that red penstemons and yellow monkey flowers line the way. The penstemons especially, with their long scarlet tubular blossoms ending in two sets of petals, upper and lower, look like hundreds of jabbering mouths. And the monkey flowers have something of the same arrangement, though not as pronounced.

Thus Nema, seeking a little quiet, wouldn't find it until halfway down the mountain-side. The trail was pleasant and broad, wide enough for two abreast, and the penstemons, a tall shrub variety arching toward her on either side, gradually ceased their jabbering and began to seem just what they were in fact: silent, open-mouthed, open-throated flowers, drinking in the loveliness of a summer morning.

By the time she reached the creek in the canyon below, the silence had replaced the clamor in her mind, and all was serene. The birds were still, resting after their dawn concert.

The creek flowed gently around the boulders in the stream bed, or over them, and occasionally some woodland creature rustled in the bushes or the branches. Usually there was no other sound.

A few cabins, left over from the days before the area had become parkland, still remained at irregular distances from one another and from the winding trail that followed the creek. Many of these cabins seemed to be permanently boarded up; several others were occupied only on an occasional weekend.

Thus, when a soft voice greeted Nema one morning, she gasped.

"Lovely day." The fellow sat on the porch of a dark brown cabin, gazing at her with deep, soulful eyes. She saw that, apart from his eyes, he was quite unattractive: squat and dark. He apologized for startling her; she merely nodded at him and hurried on. Nema was young, glamorous, slender, independent-minded, and popular, and came down from the ridge to escape conversation, not engage in it.

The next day, however, she paused when the same fellow, rising slightly from the old wooden chair he occupied on his porch, asked her if she'd like a drink: wine, beer, orange

juice, cider, punch, Coca-Cola, ginger ale, bottled water? She shook her head politely, smiling at his gentle, courtly manner as he listed the array of beverages.

"Maybe on your way back," he said. "Just say the word if you do." He gave a brilliant smile. "Are you in one of the cabins?"

"No, I live on the Ridge." She was pleased to see he wasn't impressed. She always thought it was silly when people acted impressed.

In the next few weeks, the cabin-dweller was often on his porch, and Nema would pause for a brief but amiable exchange. He seemed to love nature as much as she did, and was both knowledgeable and imaginative. One day, for instance, he suddenly smiled and cocked his head toward the stream at their left. "A duet, listen."

"A duet?" He looked quite charming when he smiled, Nema thought.

"Yes, there's a place there—see where the water pools for a minute, below those rocks? It's soprano water just above, and alto water below."

Nema listened a moment and said in delight, "Yes, it is!"

One day he said he'd acquired a stunning diamond necklace and wanted to show it

to her. After agreeing to take a look, she paused on the trail, waiting for him to fetch this marvel.

"Come inside," he said. "It has to be seen indoors, in the right setting."

Nema declined, privately thinking he was rather presumptuous on such a superficial acquaintance, and continued on her way. The next morning she was surprised to find herself feeling slightly disappointed and a trifle guilty when she passed the cabin and the porch chair was empty.

But the next day he was there again, and so was the necklace. She stopped, mesmerized. The diamonds were magnificent.

"Put it on, Nema," he said, with adoration shining in his eyes, "and if you like it, it's yours. I told you the other day that it should be seen in the right setting. And I can't imagine a better one than next to your beautiful face." He gestured to the inside of the cabin. "There's a full-length mirror just inside the door."

Nema owned several good pieces of jewelry herself, but this was the finest she had ever seen. Dozens of stones in a graceful filigree pattern glittered like the stream as it rippled over rocks in sunlight. "I

couldn't possibly," she said at last. "But thank you."

As the weeks passed, Nema found herself becoming fascinated by her new friend's gentleness and generosity; she lingered outside the cabin for longer and longer periods. They exchanged nature lore; they talked of books and movies and food and wine. Again and again he would try to persuade her to accept a gift of some sort: a collector's edition of a book she had mentioned, a rare Portuguese wine, an enchanting French perfume that Nema could smell through the gold thread that wound about its frosted glass stopper. He told Nema that she should be a movie star, and suggested she meet his best friend, who was casting a new film; he said he would be visiting London and Paris soon and would be delighted if she could accompany him, all expenses paid, of course.

But Nema was waiting for a different offer. And finally he said the words she had longed to hear.

And that's where it ended—or rather, that's where the story tantalizingly stopped. They all agreed that the last page, or pages, were missing.

"What words had she longed to hear? Three little words?" Foote asked.

"I wonder," Sarah said. "And who wrote it? That's this neighborhood, that's an accurate description—"

"—And that's the trail," Paul said. "The Seward Trail, going down to the creek. Right, hon?"

"Right. Not only that, but the same season. The penstemons and the monkey flowers. They're blooming right now. Or they were last week, anyway."

Foote looked at his sidekick, who made a note. There was a pause.

"Weird name in this story," Paul murmured. "Nema. Nema? You ever know anybody called Nema? It's like science fiction." He was running both hands through his red curls. "Nema. Nematocera. Hey, Sarah! Nematocera! Nematocera includes the crane flies. It's a suborder of Diptora."

Sarah clapped her hands. "The spider and the fly!" she cried. "Of course! It's right there! Oh my God!"

The pair looked at each other with round eyes. Paul muttered, "You think Mike did it?"

Sarah took a long breath. "He was in Hawaii. Maybe he wasn't in Hawaii. Maybe he never went."

"Hey, folks," said Foote. "Hello-ho! What are we talking about?"

Paul apologized and explained, reminding the detec-



tive about the old tale of the Spider and the Fly. "Come into my parlor, dear. Then the spider eats the fly up."

The detectives glanced at each other. Everyone was silent a moment. "We're checking on this alleged Hawaii trip," Foote said. He smoothed his mustache. "What does this guy look like, Mike Omega?"

Paul and Sarah were both reluctant to speak. Finally Sarah said, "Well, he's kind of short and squat and ugly." She looked at her husband; frowned, giggled, and covered her face with her hands, saying, "Sorry, I know it's not funny."

**T**uesday's *Times* carried only a cursory account of the murder. But reporters started calling early in the morning until Paul and Sarah finally unplugged the phone—Detective Foote had told them they would jeopardize the investigation if they talked to the press. Their answering machine could still pick up any messages.

Paul taught until, two P.M. Tuesdays, while Sarah merely had conferences starting about that time. That morning she decided to see what data a hike on the Seward Trail might yield.

She started down slowly, looking around. Last week, the wildflowers had resembled the ones in the story. But it had been hot since then. Now the yellow monkey flowers were all gone, and the red pentstemons were sparse. Thistles that had bloomed a lovely purple a week ago had gone to seed, forming little blankets of down at the base of their stalks.

How things had changed since last week! Kyle usually stayed with her on Tuesday mornings. Last week she'd bounced down the trail with him. He had swung his legs in the carrier on her back, and she had sung, and he had babbled, and she had kissed his knees and toes as if she would never get enough of him, her first baby, her perfect boy. And this morning Paul had taken him to daycare when he left. They figured he'd be safer there if Sarah was going to explore.

She wondered if the cops had managed to lift any fingerprints off that other glass, to determine who had a drink with Dyna on Sunday. Before killing her. But someone could have had a drink with her, and someone else could have killed her after that.

When Sarah recalled the birthday card, tears sprang to her eyes. Poor Dyna. A lost soul. For instance, all that

scalp-collecting—that's how Sarah thought of it. At the beginning of June when Sarah and Paul had first moved in to housesit, their glamorous young neighbor had told Sarah one morning that she wanted to get ten marriage proposals this year, and she had eight already, so only two to go, as if getting guys to pop the question was some sort of hobby.

But at twenty, Sarah reflected, she herself had been just as callous. Or almost. One guy she'd gone with just because he was Dutch. That was the only reason—he was a jerk, but he was from Amsterdam. Another guy, because she thought it was thrilling the way he cut class and sold dope.

And then she'd met Paul.

Sarah gave a long sigh. And what was Dyna's reaction to these marriage proposals? Did she just chalk up another point each time and lose interest in the person? What if between June and now, Dyna had picked up the ninth proposal, and what if Mike had proposed recently and was the tenth. Dyna had reached her goal, so she told him to get lost, and with that lousy temper of his he'd killed her? And then left for Hawaii as an alibi. Or never left. A friend could have used his ticket, and the airline would confirm that Mike

Omega had taken such and such a flight. You didn't have to show any I.D. at the ticket counter after all.

Those two glasses by the chair suggested that the killer was someone Dyna knew. Mike again. And it wasn't like Kyle to talk to strangers, and he knew Mike. She pictured Mike slipping through the back yard. Bringing Dyna flowers. To make up after a fight. And maybe some guy was with Dyna or something. And Mike got jealous. And Dyna was just a child, a stupid kid, nobody should have gotten that mad at her, to kill her!

On the trail, Sarah shook her head. Aching all over, she finally allowed herself to cry and felt better afterward.

She took off her prescription sunglasses and wiped her eyes, and then breathed on her tear-streaked glasses and dried them on her T-shirt, and put them on and looked around, and gasped.

In the story, the trail down the mountainside was broad enough for two abreast. Now it was narrow; you had to go single file. The growth had closed in at the sides, and the shrubby penstemon looked very well established. The story, therefore, must have been written long ago.

At the bottom of the Seward Trail, Sarah turned right, onto the trail next to the creek. Except for the melodic sound of the flowing water, everything was silent. Where the water pooled, water striders silently dimpled the surface. A brown lizard poured silently across the trail like an elongated drop of brown mercury. A monarch butterfly silently wandered in front of her.

From time to time, at irregular distances from each other, and at various distances from the creek, a cabin would appear at her right. As she passed each one, she would peer at it, looking for a dark brown cabin with a porch, like the one in the story.

Maybe that cabin had fallen down. Perhaps the story had been written two or three decades ago, in fact. Which would explain its rather genteel, old fashioned air. She tried to imagine Mike then, as a young bridegroom, and found she was picturing the smoldering eyes of the character in the story.

With a prickle of fear, she looked around. What if Mike was right here? Come to think of it, any of these old cabins would make a great hideout. She stopped for a moment, listening. Her heart was the loudest sound in the forest.

At her right was one of the nicer cabins. Newly shingled, with dark green shutters. Two rocking chairs on the porch. She leaned forward—was the front door open a tiny crack, or was she imagining it?

At her left, a shape appeared in the underbrush, and Sarah screamed. A mule deer stared at her, equally terrified, then bounded back into the woods as if on springs, boing, boing, boing, in time with the thumping of Sarah's heart and with its white tail flaring.

"And I bounded up the trail again, with my yellow stripe flaring," she told Paul later, over lunch at the campus cafeteria.

He laughed. "But was it open? The door?"

"I don't know. It was dark green, hard to tell if it was just a shadow."

Paul was impressed that she had narrowed down the time-frame of the story's authorship. "Now if we only knew who wrote it, several decades ago—"

Sarah's jaw dropped. "The saleslady, the ex-wife! Mike said they were married thirty years ago, right?" Paul nodded. "Trying to warn Dyna or something. And the diamond necklace in the story, and she works in a jewelry store!"

"Mmm. But she didn't look like much of a hiker."

Sarah wanted a full description.

"Jet-black hair. All twisted around on top of her head. High heels." He put down his tuna-fish sandwich to gesture. "Tight dress. Pleasingly plump." Gestured again. "Monobottomed. Girdle."

Sarah made a face. "In this heat?"

"Lots of makeup. Lots of jewelry."

"What color was her dress?"

"Huh!"

"What?"

"It had a V-neck with a flower there." He tapped his chest. "Black. With a pink flower there."

Sarah's face lit up. "Kyle's flower! Maybe it wasn't Mike who did it!"

They posited scenario after scenario, and found each one flawed. Kyle had seen the saleswoman sneaking through the back yard. But in a black dress and high heels? Well, maybe after work. So she had come to kill Dyna? Why? Or she hadn't come to kill Dyna but had lost her temper. She'd written a story to warn Dyna, and Dyna wouldn't take it seriously? "Oh boy," said Sarah and sighed.

Paul said he could drive down to Beverly Hills after his one o'clock class, and talk to the woman—maybe if he drove

down Rodeo Drive, he'd recognize the store.

"And I'll take Kyle, see if he recognizes her." He smiled. "Our little litmus test."

"Oh, honey, don't take Kyle, it wouldn't be safe."

"He'll be fine. I won't let him out of my sight."

But in the end, Paul left Kyle in daycare and went alone, just in case.

**R**odeo Drive is relatively short, and Paul knew the store was on the right. Small. Small palm tree in front? He wasn't sure. But that little valet parking lot, on this side of the store. Cameron Gallery. That was it!

It was narrow and deep and completely empty. Pussy-willow-gray carpet, and at the left, a carpeted wall with little recesses holding spotlit treasures. On the right, a row of graceful velveteen-covered chairs faced a row of locked glass-topped counters, resplendent with jewelry.

Paul took a chair in the middle of the row. Gray velvet curtains at the end of the store shifted, and the saleslady slipped through them, the one who had been so rude before. Paul gazed at her openly. Again a black dress, but a high neck this time, and no flower in



sight. Boobs scalloped on top, at their inner edges. Came from a bra being too tight, Sarah had explained to him once. A full face with a network of fine lines. Brilliant red lipstick, a practiced smile. She licked her lips briefly. "May I help you?" She sounded as if this might constitute rather a sacrifice on her part.

But when Paul gave his name and explained how he'd found her and why, her armor dropped: she turned into a warm-hearted dumpling, like a friendly neighbor sharing a choice piece of gossip. And she proceeded to be much more help than Paul had expected.

Her name was Regina Tyson. She hadn't written the story, but she knew its author, Mike's first wife, an amateur naturalist; they'd been great pals before he began courting Regina herself, thirty years ago. "After that, you know how it is, darling, I was the other woman, she wouldn't speak to me. But when their divorce was final, one day in the mail comes this story of hers, to warn me off marrying him."

And Regina had sent the story to Dyna for the same purpose. She'd known Dyna before Mike Omega came on the scene. "It was me who introduced her to the last boyfriend. A TV director, a lovely man, he

couldn't have been sweeter. When she left him, I cried, believe me."

And suddenly, Paul didn't believe her: she was almost too cosy, too confiding. "You say you sent the story—"

"Yes, I mailed it to her. I wouldn't listen when my friend was trying to do me a favor. But I figured maybe Dyna's smarter than me. That man. Mike Omega." She said the name with a sneer. "Prince Charming before you tie the knot, then afterwards horrible, he couldn't be worse, when he thinks he owns you." She curled her white, pointed fingers and examined her nail polish.

"When did you mail the story?"

"Last week." She bit her lip. "And then I read in the paper this morning what happened to Dyna, poor girl." Her mouth tightened, and she gave Paul a baleful glance. "Ari was an accident waiting to happen. I knew it would come to this with him someday."

"Ari?"

"Mike Omega." She made a breathy, jeering sound. "His name was Ari Alexandros when I married him. We lived in the Valley, a big house." After that he was Nick Olympiou, Konstantin Poulos, Peter Spiridakos, Tom Cheos—she couldn't remember half the names, a

different one for each wife. "Each one of them younger, of course. He lived all over the map."

"How come you could keep up with his whereabouts?"

She looked smug. "I'd already met my husband. He works for the IRS."

"Mike been cheating on his taxes?"

"No. But I keep hoping." She said Mike had rented out the Lookout Ridge house all these years until he started going with Dyna. "She told me he gave the tenants twenty thousand dollars to move out in ten days. Oh, he knew how to get through to Dyna, that kind of stuff always impressed her."

"When you said it would come to this, are you—"

"All the names he took were Greek," she interrupted. "And then he ends up with Omega, ridiculous. That's a fraternity, that isn't a name. That's a watch. He's from Milwaukee." Paul had to laugh, and her own smile in response was so warm and wholehearted her eyes crinkled into slits for a moment. "See, you didn't know that! Darling, listen, the man went to Greece once, when he was in the Merchant Marine. He fell in love with the place. He's nuts."

"I thought he had a house in Greece."

She gave a contemptuous little hiss. "Ari lies for the fun of it. Part of his charm. Which he slathers on with a butterknife, the phony baloney louse."

Her tone had turned hateful again, and Paul studied her face. "You think Mike killed Dyna, right?"

"Please, darling, I don't want to get involved."

Paul scratched his beard. How could he determine her veracity? "Did you insure the story at the post office when you mailed it? Do you have that little insurance slip?"

"Please," she said again. "Jewels you insure, not something like this."

"Well, you should probably tell the detectives this stuff. Because you *are* involved. That story you sent was found next to Dyna's body."

Her hands flew to her scalloped bosom, which rose and fell beneath them. "That wasn't in the paper."

"No."

"Ari." She lifted a forefinger. "Maybe she showed it to him." The finger folded into a fist. "Oh God—if I hadn't sent it ..." She shook her head quickly. "But if it wasn't that, it would have been something else." She nodded. "Yes, poor girl, she showed it to him and he went berserk, that's what happened, and he killed her."

She shrank back from the counter, crossing her arms and clutching her elbows as if cold. "It was Ari. You'll see. He didn't go anywhere, he didn't go to Hawaii, like the paper was talking about. Believe me, darling, you'll see."

Driving back, Paul was still skeptical about Regina's story. He had a weird feeling that the saleswoman had killed Dyna and was trying to pin it on Mike as a kind of revenge. But why kill Dyna? Interesting that they had known each other so long. Long enough to get mixed up in something. Drugs? What? Taking his hand off the wheel, Paul hit his head. "Damn!" He'd forgotten to bring up the story's missing ending—Regina might have shed some light on it. Well, as soon as he got back, he'd phone Toddle Foote and the Stump as he and Sarah had nicknamed the detectives.

But when he returned to the house, Sarah told him that she'd talked to Foote and found out that Mike Omega was indeed in Hawaii. If the saleswoman had been trying to frame him, she was wasting her breath.

Mike had been on a two day hike up a volcano. A Park Service ranger recognized him from his picture, which had been faxed all over the island.

Mike hadn't heard about his wife's violent death, he maintained. He seemed devastated, and told the Hawaiian detectives that he and Dyna had been secretly married in the Dominican Republic two months ago. He produced the marriage license.

"Married already!" Paul interrupted. Kyle held up his arms, and Paul lifted him high.

"How about that! Oh, and most important of all, Mike's flight left LAX at two P.M. Sunday afternoon. The guy sitting next to him and the stewardess both confirmed it. An airtight alibi. So to speak." Mike was making arrangements to fly back immediately, she said.

In the kitchen, half a beer later, Paul finished his account of what had happened at the jewelry store, and he and Sarah went back and forth on the notion of Regina as a viable suspect.

"I give up," Paul said, "we don't know enough. Hey, you know what? I'd kind of like to see that cabin you found. And see if the door is open."

"Me too. It's not even five, it's still light. It's kind of stupid, but I don't feel so scared now that I know Mike didn't do it." She laughed as Paul opened his mouth to reply. "I know it doesn't make sense. So? Let's go down there." She paused.

"What about Kyle, though?" At her feet, the baby, who had been playing with some blocks, brought one over to her, and then gave one to his dad. "Thank you, honey. We shouldn't forget that he's a witness, so he might still be in danger from whoever did it."

"Hey, what a nifty block, thank you. Yeah, but he'd be safe with both of us there." He lifted Kyle onto his lap. "Anyway, the Feds don't have any nannies in their witness protection program."

Sarah laughed. "But what if our witness won't talk?"

Paul adopted a tough voice. "Won't talk, huh, you little rat?" He tickled Kyle's stomach.

Sarah pitched her voice high. "But I can only say eleven words!" Paul laughed. "Twelve," she added in her own voice. "I heard him say dog yesterday, I forgot to tell you."

"Doh," Kyle said, and the Lab wagged her tail.

As they turned up the creek trail, Kyle, in the carrier on Paul's back, listened raptly to a single thrush. The late afternoon sun, slanting over their shoulders, was dappling everything with a golden light. When they reached the green-shuttered cabin where the deer had scared Sarah, they stopped at

the foot of the steps, examining the door.

Paul shrugged and motioned for Sarah to stay back, but she shook her head, pointed to Kyle, and tapped her chest. She climbed the steps and hesitated on the porch, listening. The thrush stopped and started again.

The door was not quite closed in fact. She held up her hand to stop Paul's coming any closer with the baby and opened the door slowly. It didn't make a sound. After determining that the cabin was empty, she reappeared. "Step into my parlor, dear," she said.

The living room and kitchen were equally shabby and dusty. But the bedroom, on the west side, appeared cleaner and more cheerful. The golden sunlight poured through a large window onto an unmade bed with crumpled white satin sheets. "Look," Paul whispered. A piece of paper protruded from under the pillow.

"Why are we whispering?" Sarah whispered. She withdrew the paper as Paul moved to her side. The penciled words were in Dyna's handwriting.

*But Nema didn't trust him any further than she could throe his ugly ass. She called up her good buddy the Wasp, and*

*asked for a little faver, one little sting would do it, no problem. So he did. And they all lived hapily ever after. (Xcept the Spider. Who died rite away, diddn feel a thing.)*

"Owah!" said Kyle, who had turned his head toward the bedroom door. His startled parents followed suit.

A goodlooking man was standing in the doorframe. He wore a flowery Hawaiian shirt and held a gun fitted with a silencer. "What're you guys doing here?" he muttered.

"Ritchie!" said Sarah, recognizing the man who had serviced the pools on the Ridge last month. "Please," she said, looking at the weapon, "it's—it's dangerous, with the baby." Her voice seemed to come from a long way off, and her legs felt liquid.

With his left hand, Ritchie rubbed the back of his neck. His muscular body shifted in its clothes. "Thought you were the cops." He sighed. "Talk about being in the wrong place at the wrong time, you guys really blew it." He massaged his neck again, working toward the shoulder. "Hi, baby," he said to Kyle.

Kyle smiled and pointed to the shirt and clapped his hands. "Owah! Owah!"

Ritchie motioned with his chin. "Gimme that there."

"This?" Paul handed over the sheet of paper.

"Ritchie," Sarah murmured, "I've got to sit down." She sat on the bed. Kyle stretched his arms toward her, squealing.

"What does he want?" Ritchie asked. "He wants down? Let 'im get down. I ain't gonna hurt him." Nobody did anything. "I said, let the baby get down!"

Paul sat on the bed next to Sarah, and she awkwardly lifted the baby out of the carrier and put him on her lap. But he immediately wriggled out of her arms, walked over to Ritchie, and patted him on the leg.

"He remembers me." Ritchie sounded surprised.

Sarah swallowed. "You used to wave at him. He always liked you."

"Glad somebody does." Ritchie stroked Kyle's head with his left hand; the gun in his right hand didn't move.

Sarah gave a long, wavering sigh. "Ritchie," she said, and took a deep breath, not sure if she could carry off the scheme that had just occurred to her. "You know, they already have your fingerprints, Ritchie, on that glass. And Dyna told me all about that idea, for you to kill Mike. And we told the detectives already."

Ritchie narrowed his eyes at her. She looked at Paul. He had almost the same expression. "She was drunk," Sarah went on. "She told me all about it. I tried to talk her out of it."

"Yeah, so did I. What a two-timer." A series of strange, high wails came from Ritchie's throat, and he clutched at it with his left hand as if he were strangling himself and reacting in pain. And then he sobbed uncontrollably and lowered his head and hid his face in the crook of his arm.

Paul instantly seized the gun, meeting no resistance. Ritchie simply staggered to the bed, crying pitifully, with great, gasping, wrenching sobs. He kept trying to speak and finally got the words out. "Loved her—so—so—much. And she said she'd marry me. And then she'd gone and married him." By now, Sarah had risen, slipped out of his way, and scooped up the baby. She stood next to the door, holding Kyle, watching Ritchie as he sat on the bed. He struck the mattress beside him over and over as tears rained onto his knees. "I don't understand it. I will never understand it!"

"Pretty rough," Paul said. "So when you found out, you shot her?"

"I didn't mean to." Kyle, who had been watching open-

mouthed, now began to howl, and Ritchie buried his face in both hands, sobbing and speaking brokenly. "For the money. She put up with all that for the money? God in heaven. For the friggin' lifestyle."

Sarah took Kyle up the trail and called the cops, and fed the baby, and worried and paced until Paul appeared an hour later and told her that two uniformed officers and a ranger had arrived at the cabin and taken Ritchie away.

On the back porch again, as the sky turned a pale peach and the shrubs in front of it started to darken, they talked and talked while Kyle played with a truck on the floor.

Here and there below them, a few lights were starting to twinkle. "He and Dyna had been meeting in that cabin for months," Paul said. "She kept stringing him along. She even told him they should start a family as soon as they got married."

Sarah groaned and winced.

"But Ritchie said he never really agreed to kill Mike." Regina was evidently telling the truth about mailing the story, Paul went on; Dyna had shown it to Ritchie down at the cabin three or four days ago. "Ritchie told me the ending, it was what we thought. The guy proposes

marriage, so Nema finally goes into the cabin and he smothers her and makes a meal of her. Ritchie said Dyna was obsessed with the story and kept saying she wasn't going to let any old story tell her how to run her life. It really got to her."

"Because she'd already married Mike."

"I expect. Right." Dyna and Mike apparently had been talking about taking a nature tour of Hawaii sometime. "But Sunday she called Ritchie and said they'd had one of their fights, and Mike had left for Hawaii by himself. When Ritchie came over, he parked down the street and snuck through our yard because he wanted to make sure Mike hadn't returned or something."

"And Kyle saw him. Was he wearing the same kind of shirt?"

"Yup. When he saw Dyna, they had a drink, and then they started arguing—Ritchie said they kept their voices low—because Ritchie didn't want to kill Mike. Dyna kept insisting that was the only way she'd feel safe. Ritchie kept asking why she just couldn't leave the guy, and she finally admitted she'd

married Mike a couple of months ago, and if she left him she wouldn't inherit anything, he'd change his will or something."

"And then Ritchie took his gun out and shot her," Sarah said.

"Wait," Paul said. "He said she ran in the cabana there and came out with that gun and put it on the table and told him he was too much of a wimp to even pick it up. So he did."

"And shot her." She held her head with both hands, shaking it slowly.

"Yeah." He sighed. "You know, Mike and Ritchie are kind of similar in a way. Something goes wrong, they go ballistic. And both of them, they call that love."

Sarah gave her husband a solemn, tender look. "You're right."

"I'm damn glad he's in custody anyway. And soon this housesitting gig will be over, and we can go home and count our blessings."

Sarah's eyes went from Paul to Kyle and back again. "One, two," she said.

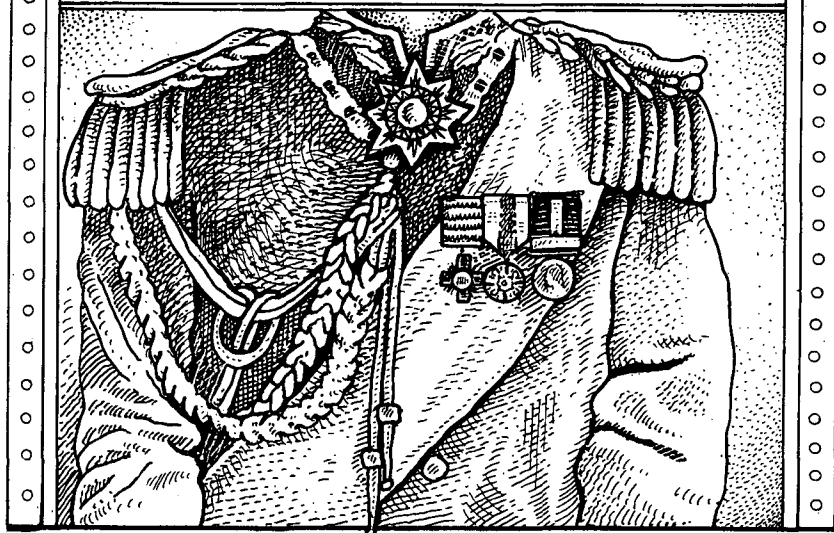
He nodded and stretched his hand out to hers. "One, two."



FICTION

# Blood and Bone

## H. R. F. Keating



**I**n the summertime Mr. G. R. Cann, having had his bite of breakfast, left the house where he had his small flat each day at exactly seven A.M. and walked up to Kensington Gardens. In the winter dark he rose later and went to the public library where he spent the morning in the reading room with the papers, thereby saving himself some expense. But re-

ally he preferred when he could to digest the pages of the *Daily Mail*, bought at the newsagent opposite, in the comparative solitude of the garden at the Orangery, on a shaded bench if it was fine, inside if wet.

He always took the same route, too, from May to October. This passed, as it happened, a shop—it had been there as long as Mr. G. R. Cann

could remember—bearing the sign IRONMONGER, G. R. CANN, DOMESTIC STORES. About a hundred yards from it, Mr. G. R. Cann always crossed over to the far pavement. He did not like it to be thought that he was making himself out to be more than he was because of the coincidence of the names. But the shop was on his most direct way to the park, and he felt, too, it would be wrong to go round by another route.

From that far pavement, however, he invariably gave the shop's crowded window a quick glance. He had remarkably good sight still, needing spectacles only for reading, and was generally able to see whether any new stock had been put on display. Of course, he had never ventured inside the place. He felt, on account of the similarity of names, such a venture would be somehow wrong. But he liked to assure himself that trade was healthy.

And on this particular day, a day he was long to remember, from across the width of the street he saw that trade was indeed flourishing, although he wished at once that it could perhaps have flourished in some other way. Because at some time on the previous day the proprietors had filled one third of the shop's small window with what must have been,

he thought, a bargain bulk purchase. It was of large packets labeled in bright red letters *Blood and Bone*.

Mr. G. R. Cann realized in a moment that the packets contained nothing else than garden fertilizer. But for just one instant he had been deeply upset by them. He disliked violence. He disliked even the thought of it. It shattered the order of things. And the blood-red words on the packets, however horticultural a moment's thought had shown them to be, had said to him with sudden inexorability: violence.

But in a minute or so, back on his proper side of the street, he was able to make his way onwards at his customary sedate pace, taking in the various regular events that lay on his way and finding his customary pleasure in them. There was the place where, day after day, he heard the gurgle of water in the drainpipe running down the side of a big mansion block, indicating that some unknown person had just emerged from his morning bath. There was the compulsively talkative old lady who contrived to come out to the milkman every day just as his float halted at the corner of the wide stretch of Palace Court. There was the burly man, head down, filling in the *Times* crossword as he walked,

who almost always came out of the park gates just as Mr. G. R. Cann himself went in.

Mr. G. R. Cann knew that he could not always rely on encountering each of them at the same place every day, but it gave him a little lift when such signs of regularity and order manifested themselves. He would have liked the world always to stay as it was, with whatever was there, good or bad, never changing. But he knew that change did come. After all, it had been at very little notice that he had had to leave the desk he had occupied for years at Mayhew and Mayhew, glass merchants. He knew that there had to be changes, and he had brought himself to accept that.

And change, he found that day, had come even to early-morning Kensington Gardens, subject usually only to the changing pattern of the seasons. But there now, cutting off the broad path leading down to the Orangery, was a long fence of chestnut palings sweeping out in a wide arc from the neat iron railing that separates the public area from the lawn where royalty and its servants from time to time jump horses or play football.

Mr. G. R. Cann guessed at once why the fence was there. A similar arrangement had been

made as a security measure some years before when a particularly vulnerable president of the United States had come to London. And now an equally vulnerable visitor, or one even more so, was due to arrive. Mr. G. R. Cann had read about him in the *Daily Mail*. It was Dr. Prigono, president of Vorneo, the Vulture of Vorneo the *Mail* had called him. Not without justice if even half what they said about him was true. Innocent people shot by the hundred. What they called torture camps set up by the dozen, with Dr. Prigono often personally supervising what went on in them. A thoroughly nasty piece of work. And coming to Britain, apparently, to sign some multi-million dollar arms deal. There had been an outcry. Protest marches. A group of Vornean exiles had started a riot outside the embassy. But the government had persisted. Jobs, it was said, were at stake.

But now, standing beside the notice saying PLEASE ENCOURAGE YOUR DOG TO USE THIS ENCLOSURE AND NOT FOUL OTHER AREAS OF THE PARK—a notice he always liked for its tone of quiet politeness—and taking in the full extent of the protective zone of chestnut palings, Mr. G. R. Cann thought he understood what was happening. The Vulture of Vorneo was, ac-

cording to the *Mail*, not due to come to Britain till next week. But plainly his arrival had been secretly advanced to forestall the protests, and the long stretch of palings had been put up overnight as an extra precaution.

Mr. G. R. Cann hoped the government knew what it was about, though. In his experience at Mayhew and Mayhew, if you altered arrangements at the last moment—Young Mr. Bob had been a great one for doing that, full of sudden enthusiasms—things were apt to go wrong. People who needed to know were not informed, or sometimes the other way about. And then there was muddle.

Well, he thought, it's none of it anything to do with me. I'll just have to go the long way round to the Orangery. Can't be helped.

Just then one of his regulars came swooping by, the young fat lady with the three little brownish dogs. And, yes, he saw as she waddled rapidly away the bright-colored skirt that hung from her waist like a circular curtain still had that place at the back where the hem had come adrift. He had noticed it first three days ago. Not much that got past him, unless he was wearing his reading specs. And, as per

usual, the young miss was failing to encourage her dogs to use.

Somewhat heartened by this example of regularity, even if in a bad cause, Mr. G. R. Cann set out again, heading for his customary bench among the huge, still, calming, clipped trees lining the central walk of the Orangery garden. And as he skirted the obtrusive palings, he saw ahead of him another of his regulars. A comparatively new planet in the regular circlings of the earliest park walkers, but regular for all that. A man in a fawn raincoat who had come at this time every day for the past month, exercising a big borzoi. There he was now, marching along as ever—he always encouraged the borzoi to use, waiting patiently while it sniffed among the sand until it had found a spot it was happy with—with the dog's lead dangling from one hand and his stout walking stick swinging like a pendulum from the other.

Mr. G. R. Cann began to feel that, despite the palings and what they signified, all was as right with the world as could reasonably be expected.

And then, coming with a sudden blotting-out roar of sound seemingly from out of a cloudless sky, a helicopter was descending onto the royal lawn. All the passersby stopped and

stood stock-still, staring, as if the noise and wild motion inside the palings had to be compensated for in complete stillness and silence outside them—the fat young lady with the dropped skirt hem—even her dogs were frozen in stillness—the man walking the borzoi, the joggers Mr. G. R. Cann had hardly yet noticed, though he knew the girl all in white would have on a T-shirt, as she had had every morning for more than a month, bearing the slogan *Swedish Secret*.

He had never quite understood what that meant. But there were lots of things in today's world he did not really understand.

And now the helicopter was down. From the royal residence at the end of the lawn a small group of men in black tailcoats began approaching. The wide doors of the helicopter were thrust open. Steps were lowered. And then, there in the doorway, lit by the bright morning sun, stood a huge man in a uniform that made those of the cinema commissionaires Mr. G. R. Cann remembered from his youth look like models of decorum. Gold glittered from two massive epaulettes. It glinted from twined braid across the chest. It shone like a halo all round the brilliant blue cap. And the man simply stood

there, like a conquering hero. A hero who, despite all the evil he had done, was conquering this feeble, desperate-for-money island on whose soil he had just arrived.

The Vulture of Vorneo stood there. But out of the corner of his eye, Mr. G. R. Cann, standing modestly at the rear of the cluster of spectators, saw now one single quiet movement among the statue-struck, silent group. It was only afterwards that he fully realized what that slow movement had been. It had been the man with the borzoi, not ten yards away from him, quietly raising his heavy walking stick till it pointed straight at the gold-dazzling figure in the helicopter doorway.

And then, quite suddenly, the full brown face under the glinting braided cap had exploded. Into a hurling outwards of blood and bone.

Mr. G. R. Cann had actually seen the bone. White fragments. With his excellent long-sight he had been able to see them quite clearly, shooting outwards together with the bright red blood.

Perhaps it was the sheer vividness of the sight that stopped him, after one involuntary step towards the man with the deadly walking stick, from doing anything more. But it was

not shock that, a second later, kept him standing just where he was. It was—he came to realize, thinking about it later that morning—a conscious decision. He had decided to suspend judgment.

At the end of half a minute the officials, whoever they were, on board the helicopter had leapt into action. Scarcely had the Vulture's body tumbled forward to lie inert on the English grass below than four or five uniformed men came jumping down after him. One crouched over the body as if there could be any doubt that it was a body, a dead body. The others knelt, weapons suddenly in their hands, in a defensive shield all round.

And the spectators began to react as well, in a dozen different ways. The girl with the *Swedish Secret* T-shirt set up a tiny, high-pitched screaming that went on and on like a burglar alarm. The fat young woman collapsed plump-down among her little brown dogs. Two of the joggers ran forward to the palings, looking as if they were going to vault over, and then, when they saw the semicircle of pointing guns, threw themselves flat. From farther off others of the park's early-birds began hurrying towards the scene. But the man with the borzoi simply stood where

he was, looking at the helicopter and the big sprawled body in front of it for all the world as if it was a sight of some interest but nothing more. A minor street accident. A scuffle between two or three youths.

Mr. G. R. Cann wondered whether he ought to go up to him and carry out a citizen's arrest. It was not any fear of what other bullets there might be in that disguised gun that kept him back. Nor did he even feel that an arrest was something that ought to be left to officialdom—a police officer in uniform from among the black tailcoats at the royal residence was striding purposefully across now—since he was sure that no one knew it was the man with the stick who should be arrested. No one else, he was certain, would have noticed that slow raising-up of the stick-gun, its equally slow lowering after the blood and bone had spurted out.

No, he felt simply that the matter needed more consideration.

And he knew, too, that there was no need for hurry. The man with the borzoi was not going to make a sudden break for it. Not from the way he was standing there, quietly looking on. In fact, in all probability at this same time next morning he would be there once again. He

would put his dog into the enclosure and wait, quite patiently, until it had chosen to perform. And then he would resume his walk, going down to the Round Pond, exactly where he had gone yesterday, exactly where he had gone on all the mornings for the past month.

Because, Mr. G. R. Cann had come to realize with a slow, placid dawning of understanding, the dog walker was a professional assassin. A hit man.

It must have been an extraordinarily well-thought-out affair. No doubt the man had been recruited by those exiles who had rioted the other day outside the embassy, and once engaged, he had set about his job in a thoroughly professional manner. The point had been to establish himself as a regular visitor to the park, someone who had a right to be where he was when he was. So he would have got hold of a dog, one that was particularly noticeable, and begun his regular walks with it, swinging his heavy walking stick, past the place where the American president had once landed, and where—no doubt the exiles had their sources of information—it was expected the Vulture would land in his turn. And the rest had been simple. Daring but simple.

One of the newcomers was helping the fat young woman to her feet now, collecting the dusty trailing leads of her little dogs, evidently asking her whether she felt all right. And a moment or two later she was setting off back in the direction of the gates. A shorter walk than usual for three small brown dogs. The flat-on-their-faces joggers were scrambling to their feet, looking rather ashamed. Only in the far distance could be heard the wail of police sirens. The man with the borzoi turned and began to walk away in the direction of the Round Pond.

Mr. G. R. Cann decided there was no reason to linger either. He set off towards the calm of the massive clipped trees of the Orangery garden. There was nothing he could say to help the police, when they arrived. Other, of course, than to tell them who it was who had sent the Vulture's head fanning out in that mixture of blood and bone. And he had not made up his mind yet whether he would do that. After all, there were people who were better dead. You could not let the world go on and on for ever in its bad old way. He needed to think it all out. In his own time. ■

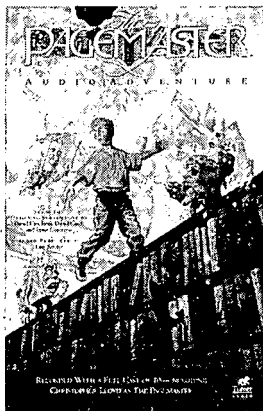




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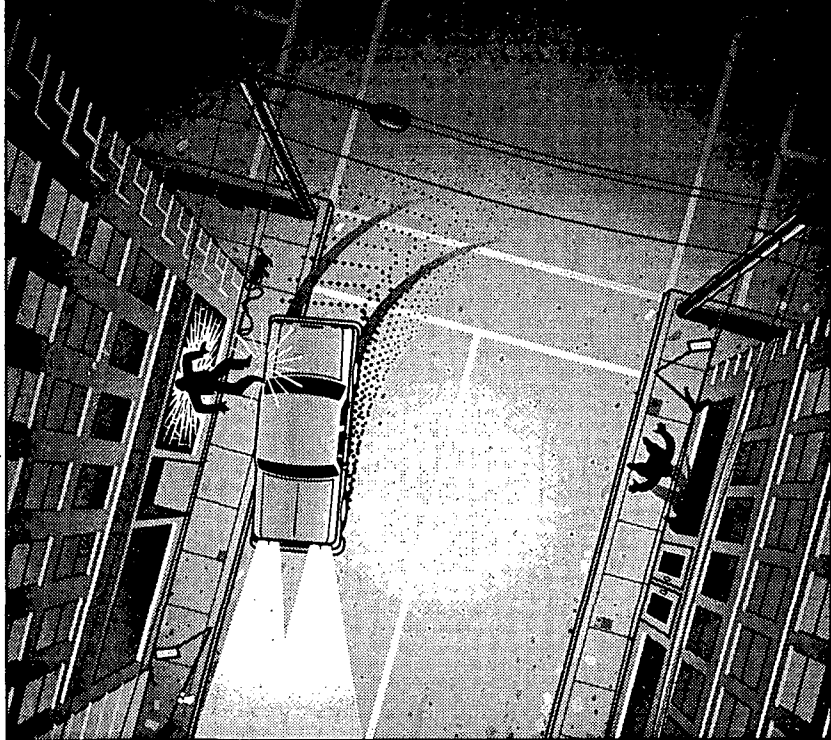
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FICTION

# Flashpoint

D. H. Reddall



Chaney plodded down Genesee Street, briefcase banging his knee. He looked and felt like a man battling a strong current. It was seven o'clock, and he still had a couple of hours of phone

calls and paperwork before his day was done.

Before him, glowing in the last rays of the sun, stood the Mutual Building, a squat seven story pile of bricks that, back in the thirties, had been a center

of commerce. Now it was surrounded by vacant storefronts, a pawnshop, several bars, and a disreputable hotel.

The company had not seen any merit in relocating a one-man office uptown to the high-rent district. Chaney took it personally, realizing, perhaps, that they were sending him a message, that this was it: end of the line. Forget district manager, Ralphie boy. Like water you have sought your own level, and it's the fifth floor of the Mutual, a decrepit building in a decaying neighborhood in a dying town.

"Be loyal to The Company and The Company will be loyal to you."

Right. And the shoes will stretch, and the check is in the mail.

Chaney shifted the briefcase to his left hand. He'd given the company eleven years, working nights and a lot of Saturdays, too. Being an insurance adjuster was an ulcer job. You were squeezed between two entities: the aggrieved and the company, one with his hand out, the other with its hand clenched tightly around the purse. Avarice and distrust on both sides, Chaney in the middle.

Julius, the neighborhood's resident derelict, crouched in the doorway as Chaney ap-

proached. He was drunk as usual, pulling and plucking at imagined threads on his clothes, muttering to himself, and rocking back and forth in the shadows. Spittle stained his overcoat through the grime.

Christ, thought Chaney, I need a drink.

He crossed the street to the Velvet Hammer and nodded to the bartender, who didn't have to ask. Chaney was getting hammered here a lot lately.

Howie Lambert sat at his regular booth. Chaney carried his martini over and settled in with a grunt and a sigh.

"What do you call four hundred lawyers on a chain gang?" he asked. Lambert shrugged.

"A good start."

The lawyer grinned.

"The old man has me doing pro bono work this month, probably because of jokes like that one." He threw back his drink and signaled for another. "You look tired, Ralph."

Chaney nodded. Tired, yes. Physically and mentally wiped out. There was a feeling of dislocation lately, as if he was watching someone else live his life. He'd been having trouble remembering people's names. Worse, on a couple of occasions he had suddenly become aware that he was gesturing and talking aloud to himself on the

street, just like that dipwad, Julius.

Yesterday he had completely forgotten an appointment with the contractor handling a fire loss over in Whitesboro. And when he got home, Carol started hollering at him that he'd forgotten his dentist appointment and now he would have to pay for it even though he hadn't gone and maybe he should just let his teeth rot out of his head, there wasn't anything else in there to keep them company anyway, rather than throw good money out the window.

Lambert was saying something.

"I said you need a vacation."

"Had one in August. They gave me three weeks this year. Hot damn, huh?" Those three weeks were spent in Jersey with his in-laws. It had made the prospect of open-heart surgery seem attractive.

He looked at his friend, who looked back at him with concern. Lambert was single, drove an Alfa Romeo, spent a couple of months each year in the islands partying and getting a tan. He didn't know what it was like to eat a mile of crap every day on the job, to go home to a shrieking harridan of a wife and two kids who treated you like you were a cretin.

There was nothing Chaney could say to Lambert. He got up and went to the bar for another drink.

One hour and three martinis later he crossed back over Genesee Street to the Mutual Building.

Mercifully, Julius wasn't in sight. Chaney let himself into the lobby. The only other tenants were a collection agency, an aged optometrist, and someone named Sylvester who advertised as a chiropractor, nutritionist, and holistic massage therapist. None of them was ever in the building after five.

Boarding the elevator, he pushed the button for the fifth floor. The cage lurched, then began its slow ascent. The front of the elevator was not enclosed but was simply an open metal grillework. Chaney wondered when the last time was that any of the stuffed suits at the home office had ridden in a gerbil cage like this.

He opened the door to his office, a pastel green cubicle tastefully furnished with metal desk, file cabinet, telephone, and fluorescent light: all the ambience of a jail cell.

Flushed with alcohol, he sat staring at a crack in the plaster, fatigue spreading to every muscle and joint in his body.

The fluorescents buzzed gently overhead. A fly described random geometric patterns about the room. Chaney leaned back and closed his eyes for a moment, vaguely aware of sirens rising in the Middleton night.

When he woke his neck was badly kinked from sleeping in the chair. He checked his watch: almost midnight. No wonder his neck was sore.

He locked up and began walking the three blocks to the parking lot where he kept his car. The city was quiet at this hour and surprisingly warm for October. Except for an old gent walking his dog along the opposite sidewalk, Chaney had it all to himself.

It abruptly got less quiet as he approached the intersection with Madison.

The Chevy took the corner much too fast. Tires screaming, it fishtailed over the curb and up onto the sidewalk. The rear fender slammed into the old man, lofting him into the air and through the display window of Empire Music in a cascade of broken glass.

Chaney stood, stunned, as the Chevy powered back onto the road and gunned down Genesee, running a red light on the way. He caught a brief glimpse of a pale frightened

face, a goatee, a red baseball cap worn backwards.

Recovering from the shock, he sprinted across the road. Miraculously, the dog was unharmed. It stood sniffing a telephone pole, apparently unconcerned about its master, who lay amidst a pile of saxophones, sheet music, and splintered guitars.

There was no blood, but the old man was clearly dead. His head lay at an impossible angle to his shoulders, and he was staring, goggle-eyed, at nothing in particular.

The dog appeared then, picking its way carefully through shards of glass and twisted music stands. It smelled the body and then lay down, gently resting its muzzle on the dead man's thigh.

Chaney called 911 through the blare of the store alarm and sat down to wait for the cops.

He took the next day off.

That in itself was unusual; he rarely missed a day of work. This morning, however, he had waken up to an epiphany. He, Chaney, was alive. Alive!

He dressed and drove downtown as usual, but everything was different now, fresh and somehow new. Brick buildings fairly bristled red in the morning sunlight. Steam spouted whitely from the laundry

stacks on Liberty Street. A pretty girl clapped a hand to her yellow hat to keep it from being blown away by the breeze. She and Chaney exchanged smiles. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been this happy.

He parked the car, got out and stretched, took a deep breath of fresh autumn air, and decided then and there to take the day off. He'd explore the town on foot, check out a bookstore or two, have lunch, maybe take in a movie.

It wasn't hard to figure, he thought, as he strolled up Genesee toward the shopping district. Witnessing another man's death had ripped open the doors of his everyday perceptions. What had happened to the old man could just as easily have happened to him. There were no guarantees; life was contingent. You could live to be ninety, or you could get shuffled out of the deck tomorrow by a lunatic with a grudge and a gun, by a bad valve in the old ticker, by a meteorite for crissake.

Chaney stopped walking as a second revelation crowded fast on the heels of the first: what good would it do to live to be ninety if most of those years were spent—wasted—doing something distasteful or meaningless?

He crossed the street to a little park and found a bench beneath the beech trees. Children were running around the playground at St. Anthony's, screaming and laughing before classes began for the day. The air was rich with the scents of fresh bread and coffee from a nearby cafe. Overhead, squirrels chased each other through the branches. Chaney felt as if he'd never seen or smelled or heard any of it before, as if he'd been living in a tunnel or a bunker for the past eleven years.

And then the third thought dropped on him like a hammer: he didn't just dislike his job. He hated it. Hated the pressure, hated the wingtips and the fedora and the briefcase, hated the utter meaninglessness of what he did for nine or ten hours a day.

Furthermore, it was affecting his marriage, which, he saw with sudden clarity, had grown more than a little stale lately. A lot of the blame for that certainly lay with him.

He leaned back and watched the beech trees spend their leaves like gold coins upon the grass. He was going to quit his job. Hell, he had a college degree. He could do just about anything he wanted to do. The only reason he'd signed on with the insurance company in the first place was that he had

needed a real job when he and Carol had decided to get married. He'd gone to an employment agency, they had sent him to Midstate, and inertia had taken over.

But now—well, he was still young. A young guy with ambition could write his own ticket. Carol would be nervous at first, but she'd come around. He'd get her to see that anything was possible. Anything.

At the request of the police he spent part of the following afternoon looking through mug books. After an hour the sullen faces all began to look alike.

A Lieutenant Ruiz took notes as Chaney went over the details of the incident again.

"Okay: sort of a gaunt face, goatee, bad complexion, red baseball cap. How about a license plate or anything unusual about the car? Think back. Take your time."

Chaney closed his eyes and froze the frame: the victim in mid-air, arms thrown out, an expression of utter surprise on his face; the car accelerating back towards the roadway; the driver's eyes locking with Chaney's for an instant, photographing each other in the actinic wash of a streetlamp. Then the old man went through the window and the car was gone.

He opened his eyes, shook his head.

Ruiz fired a plastic-tipped cigar and slid another mug book across the table. He flipped a few pages before giving it to Chaney.

"Take a look at these pictures if you would."

And there he was; at least, it *looked* like the driver of the Chevy.

"You sure?" asked Ruiz.

"Pretty sure, but not positive."

Ruiz sighed and closed the book.

"I'm sorry. It happened so fast—"

"Don't worry about it," said Ruiz. "When you first described him, I thought of Selby. He's not exactly a stranger to law enforcement." He placed the cigar carefully on the edge of the desk.

"It's only fair to warn you, Mr. Chaney. Selby's a bad boy. He's currently out on parole for manslaughter, and that's just the most recent of his many accomplishments."

"What did he do?"

"He beat a man to death with a baseball bat over a ten dollar bet, about six years ago."

"And he's out?"

"I don't write the laws, Mr. Chaney. Had it my way we'd give some of these creeps a fair



trial and then give them a free ride on Old Sparky."

"What do you have to do to get a life sentence any more? I mean, actually life?"

Ruiz retrieved the cigar. He looked tired and bitter.

"You got me. Shoot the judge's mother, maybe. Point is, I would like for you to be careful until such time as we pick Selby up. He's a loner, a career criminal, and as far as I'm concerned, a sociopath. You're the only witness we have to the hit and run. Now if we nail him for that, and for vehicular homicide, with him already on parole for a previous, he's facing some serious time."

"You think he might—"

"It's unlikely, but it is possible. Selby's a mean little bastard, and he has a well-developed instinct for self-preservation. I don't mean to alarm you. Just be aware of the possibility."

Ruiz walked him to the door. "Don't be overly concerned here, Mr. Chaney. He probably didn't get a good look at you, either."

Chaney drove back to the office, playing the accident scene over again in his head. He was not comforted. He'd seen Selby, all right.

And Selby had seen him.

\*

Once back at his desk Chaney put it out of his mind, and after clearing up some paperwork and making a few phone calls, he got down to the pleasant task of preparing his resume.

He had narrowed his job search down to two fields: librarian or teacher. Of the two, he was leaning toward teaching. His degree was in liberal arts with a major in English, perfect for a prospective teacher.

An hour later he sat staring at a single sheet of paper. He was appalled. Had he really accomplished so little in his life? Even including his military service he had been unable to fill the page. He decided to get some dinner, regroup, and do some creative thinking. There were ways to puff a resume.

By eight o'clock things were looking up. To his resume he had added intramural sports, journalism (one instance of sports reporting in his school paper), and photojournalism (a photograph of a football game accompanying the abovementioned article).

He was trying to inflate his hobby of constructing crossword puzzles into something significant (cryptographer? semanticist?) when a noise in the

building brought him out of his deliberations.

In addition to the elevator, the Mutual Building had stairs on its north and south sides with heavy fire doors at each floor. One of those doors had just swung shut on one of the lower levels.

In eleven years Chaney had never seen anyone else in the building at night. Perhaps Sylvester had an evening appointment for a holistic massage, whatever the hell that was.

He strained his ears but heard no other sounds. Sylvester was on the third floor; he should be able, in the otherwise empty building, to hear him entering his office. Yet he heard nothing, not even footfalls.

It might be Sylvester.

Or maybe—

The fear hit him like a body blow.

Maybe it was Selby.

But how?

Easy. Selby had only to hang around the neighborhood until he spotted Chaney, then follow him here. The entrance was locked, but that wouldn't stop a—what had Ruiz said—a career criminal.

He imagined the thin sallow face upturned, noting the only lighted window in the building; then, again, scanning the cheap white plastic letters on the black sign in the lobby:

Fifth Floor; Midstate Insurance Company; Ralph Chaney, Claims.

His first thought was to lock the door and call the police. Halfway to the door he stopped. If he locked himself in, he might have time to dial the police, but by the time they got here Selby could easily have broken in, by shooting the lock or just by kicking the door apart. It wasn't a solid-core door, just a cheesy hollow number. Then there'd be nowhere to go. And there was no doubt in his mind that Selby meant to kill him.

He made a quick decision. Pushing the button in the handle that locked the door, he shut it and ran to the north stairwell. He was fairly confident that the door he'd heard earlier had been on the south side of the building.

He peered through the wire-reinforced window of the stairwell door, then cracked it open an inch. Hearing and seeing nothing, he stepped onto the landing and gently closed the metal door behind him.

His plan was simple: while Selby was breaking into his office he'd be getting out the front door. Removing his shoes, he started down the stairs as quickly and as quietly as he could. Just as he reached the second floor landing, he heard

the sound of splintering wood from above.

Heart pounding, he took the remaining stairs two at a time, burst through the lobby door, and ran for the entrance.

It seemed to Chaney that he had entered a nightmare. The lobby appeared unnaturally elongated, the entrance impossibly far away, as if seen through the wrong end of a telescope. The fluorescents reflected harshly off the black and white linoleum squares as he ran, legs churning but stocking feet slipping on the waxed tiles, denying him traction.

After what seemed an eternity his hand slapped the brass door handle, and he heaved against it.

Locked! The damned door was locked!

Reflexively, he grabbed for the keys and with a jolt of terror realized that he wasn't wearing his jacket. It was draped neatly over the back of his office chair, and the keys were in the pocket.

A metal door crashed open somewhere above him, and this time he heard footsteps rapidly descending the north stairs.

Chaney looked around the lobby frantically. There had to be another way out. He had never noticed it, but there had to be one. He ran to the far end,

then to both sides. There was no other exit.

He almost gave up then. He slumped against the wall, breath coming in ragged gusts. No secondary means of egress, he thought, wanting to laugh at the irony of it. As claims adjuster he had visited many a charred building, heard the horror stories about people burned to death because there was no secondary means of egress. And what bureaucrat had dreamed up *that* bloated phrase, he wondered. What was wrong with simply calling it a back door?

He struggled to get a grip on himself, to catch his breath. Christ, he was out of shape! Even if he'd made it to the street, Selby would have run him down within a block, two at most.

And then he got mad. Why should he be running for his life, hunted like an animal, by some maggot. He'd just turned his life around, and by God, he wasn't about to surrender it without a fight to some shiftless, irresponsible, homicidal punk who ought to be in jail for the rest of his natural life.

He ran to the elevator and forced his hand through the metal grille next to the operating panel. Selby's footsteps were much louder now, much closer. Chaney fingered the

buttons on the panel until he found the highest one. The mechanism came to life with a growl and a snapping of cables. For an instant he thought his hand was stuck, but he yanked it free just as the cage started up.

Bolting through the south fire door, he descended the stairs to the basement. While Selby chased the elevator back up, he would find a window, a cellar door, some other way out of the building.

It was immediately apparent that the cellar was a monumental mistake. No door, no window, only a storage room at the far end of the single corridor. He started back to the stairs. In the lobby there would be a heavy chair, or a sand-filled ashtray—something heavy with which to break the thick glass of the main door.

He was halfway to the stairs when the door was flung open. Selby's shadow, lengthened and distorted, appeared on the stairwell wall. Chaney froze, paralyzed by a rush of bowel-loosening fear. He was trapped.

Without thinking, he took refuge in the only place left: the storage room. He pulled the heavy metal door closed behind him, snapped the deadbolt, and pulled the light cord.

One wall of the room was taken up with a workbench. A

few desks and chairs were gathered in one corner near an auxiliary generator. Chaney saw nothing that could be used as a weapon.

His head snapped around as the door handle turned once, twice. How had Selby gotten down here so fast? Given the slow pace of the elevator, he had probably beaten it back to the second or third floor, seen the empty cage, and figured out Chaney's plan at once.

The door, he noted, was set in concrete and looked reassuringly substantial. He doubted that Selby could batter it down. Emotionally drained, he sat on one of the dusty chairs and had actually begun to relax when the tapping started.

What was Selby up to? He tiptoed to the door. It was a light tapping, certainly not enough to weaken the cinder blocks. The noise was coming from the left, and with a surge of horror Chaney realized that the door had been hung with the hinge pins on the outside. Selby was patiently knocking out those hinge pins. When all three were removed, the door would fall.

With an effort he fought down panic, summoning instead the anger he'd felt earlier. His eyes swept the room again: bench, furniture, generator.

*Generator!* The unit was useless without fuel. And there it was, a green jerry can against the wall. He shook it: almost full.

A metallic ping in the hallway: the first pin hitting the floor. The tapping began again. Chaney forced himself not to listen. The fuel was his only possible weapon. There were the chairs, but Selby was certain to have a gun; no chance swinging a chair at an armed opponent.

He could pour the fuel under the door and light it. A quick search turned up no matches, however, and Chaney didn't smoke. What good was gasoline without a match?

Then he remembered Sergeant McClure.

Fifteen years earlier, when stationed at Fort Breyer, Chaney had been trained in demolitions. McClure, a taciturn lifer from Tennessee, had been his instructor. Part of Sergeant Mac's course had dealt with improvisation: how, in a pinch, to use common everyday items to create an explosive or incendiary device.

Chaney leapt to the workbench and saw that, for once, he was in luck. Gathering a hand drill and a box of spare lightbulbs, working as fast as he dared, he secured a bulb in the bench vise and carefully

drilled a quarter-inch hole in the metal base.

The second hinge pin clattered to the floor. The door wobbled and for one terrible moment Chaney thought it would give way. But the center hinge combined with the dead-bolt were enough to hold it in place.

As the tapping resumed Chaney poured gasoline into the hole he had drilled, spilling fuel freely, until the bulb was half filled. Running to the door he pulled the light cord, plunging the room into darkness.

For a moment he couldn't find the fixture. Then, guided by the heat, his hand closed over the hot bulb. He unscrewed it, heedless of the pain, and threaded the new bulb into place. There was just time to dive behind the desks before the third pin dropped and the door was kicked violently into the room.

Heart thundering, Chaney peered through a space between two desks. Framed in the doorway, backlit by the dim light of the corridor, stood his pursuer, automatic pistol in hand.

Despite his fear Chaney wanted to laugh. Selby was about five five, a hundred and twenty pounds. Chaney could break him in half.

Then he looked again: the unnaturally pale, pockmarked face, black deepset eyes, lips pulled back from yellow teeth—there was nothing laughable, and not a trace of mercy in that face.

Selby's head swiveled from side to side, slowly scanning the darkened room, finally coming to rest on the furniture, the only possible hiding place. The lips grimaced in a feral smile. He slid his hand along the wall to one side of the door, then the other, searching for the light switch. Then he saw the pull cord. He stepped into the room and turned on the light.

There was a sharp explosion and a flash of light when the lightbulb exploded, sending a rain of burning fuel down onto the hapless gunman. In seconds his clothes were aflame. He fell to the floor screaming and rolling back and forth in a desperate attempt to quench the flames.

Chaney vaulted the desks and, snatching a throw rug from the floor, dropped it on the burning man. Then he threw himself on both to keep Selby from rolling free.

He stayed there until the flames were extinguished and the only sounds were the moans

of the now inert gunman echoing from the cold concrete walls.

A full moon rode just above the city skyline as Chaney walked to the parking lot. The neighborhood was quiet again now that the police and ambulance personnel had turned off their flashing lights and left.

Lieutenant Ruiz had been very solicitous, making sure that Chaney was all right and telling him to go on home and not to worry about giving a complete statement until the morning.

Selby would survive to go on trial for, among other things, attempted murder. Chaney had felt a moment of pity for him when he was loaded into the ambulance. He was in shock and looked small and vulnerable on the stretcher. The pity evaporated when Chaney remembered the look of pleasurable anticipation on Selby's face when he entered the storeroom.

Something he had read many years before surfaced from his memory: "The cat in gloves catches no mice." Chaney watched his moon shadow precede him down the sidewalk, and he smiled.

This time the mouse had done the catching.

FICTION

# CHOP CHOP

Cynthia Lawrence



**G**ood afternoon, class. First thing to tell you is that everyone here is very brave. Hah, hah, that's a joke. You just want to learn to cook. Right? But maybe also you read all that bad, sick stuff

about me in the newspapers, and you become curious. Hah, hah, okay with me. Curiosity kills the cat, but—I assure you—I am not a killer, you are not murderers. We are masters and students of delectable Chi-



nese cooking, and today you will learn my techniques. We will cook and taste and go home with our appetites satisfied.

So, let us get to work. First, my basic servant, the Chinese cleaver! I call him Chop Chop, and he does whatever the firm pressure of my fingers tells him. See the blade gleam? You can't each of you feel the sharpness, so let me demonstrate on this innocent scallion. Chop, chop, and see! With two strokes I have slivers of scallion so fine they could pass through a cloth of silk. When the newspaper says that Mr. Bixby chokes to death on strings of scallion like this, is the cleaver to blame? Is it Mrs. Bixby's fault? Is it, hah, hah, *my* fault? Good, you're laughing, the whole class is sharing a laugh. Well, we're here to learn and have fun.

True, Mrs. Bixby did study her techniques here, and after class she asks me to show her the Super Sliver Technique. Did I mention the Super Sliver? No? Well, it is not for everyone. You must practice religiously to get the slivers razor thin. But I know Mrs. Bixby practices well. She tells me so herself, in a pretty postcard she sends me from her cruise to the Greek islands.

Also, she does buy her cleaver here, after a class just like yours today. And after *our*

class, you can buy a Chop Chop of your own from my lovely assistant at the table in the rear of this room. Only twenty-nine ninety-five, special price. Imported only for me from the finest cutlery maker in Hong Kong. You don't find Chop Chop in your department store or cook's specialty store. Even in Chinatown. Only from me.

See how I cut flesh of this eggplant into firm juicy slices. Chop, chop! For my special eggplant dish, Hunan style. A little spicy, like love with man and woman should be. Hah, hah. While we laugh, please pay attention to how I handle blade. Careful, edge is very sharp. Chop, chop. Later we slide eggplant into a hot wok and stir like crazy, faster, faster! Great fun! But for now, we talk technique. Oh, I almost forget. Sometimes eggplant is bitter, like love when it turns to hate. Never mind. We get bitterness out, we slap it out with the flat of my Chop Chop blade. Foolproof. I teach method in my advanced class. You are invited to sign up later. This is usually a small class, so you will see many amazing culinary secrets, close up.

Me? I learn chopping, slicing, shredding, carving techniques from master Hong Kong chefs, best in the world. I am very serious student. I want to exceed

my masters. I am confessing my own lack of modesty, but this is true. While I am still a puny apprentice, skinny arms becoming hard and strong, it comes to me as my cleaver slashes downward, if I cut deep enough, maybe I find truth.

Or maybe, hah, hah, I just learn to cut short ribs—like these—into clean, even chunks, for barbecue ribs recipe I show you later. See? Simply grasp handle, raise arm high, and using a straight up and down motion, put your weight into it, and *slash!* through the bone!

I hope this story of my career is not too boring, but I want to tell you this about my Chop Chop. Before I leave Hong Kong for America, I develop my own blade, have it made to my own specifications. See how it gleams, see how it cuts through the air? Is it knife? Is it sword? Sometimes I think Chop Chop has a life of its own. Anyway, yours for only twenty-nine ninety-five.

Now, Chop Chop not only chops, slivers, and slashes, it also crushes. I think, before I demonstrate, it is a good idea to dismiss that nonsense about Mr. Ortega's unfortunate demise. Yes, yes, I know that Miss Ortega takes my techniques class only a month before her father's head is stomped by a horse, but after

all, he is a horse trainer, yes? Rest in peace, poor little father.

Before you ask me about that silly editorial in the Fresno newspaper, let me show you the crushing technique. I talk while I work because it's necessary to start heating the wok for our lunchtime tastings. And we are here to eat as well as study, right? Right. So we put our peeled garlic cloves on the edge of the chopping board, take Chop Chop, and slap it down on the garlic. Do not use too much pressure unless garlic is very meaty. Well, then, of course, you slap harder. Or if you want garlic paste, use the handle of your Chop Chop and smash, smash, smash!

Did I mention I am a guest at Miss Ortega's wedding and that she and her new husband are nicely settled into the main house of the Ortega ranch? Too bad that the wedding reception menu is not Chinese, but perhaps Mexican food is a wiser choice after that reporter traces Miss Ortega to my class. It is still a puzzle to the police that there is garlic mixed in with the blood on Mr. Ortega's head. However, the coroner rules that Mr. Ortega has been thrown from his horse and trampled. It's too bad that the former Miss Ortega misplaces her Chop Chop during the excitement before the wedding,

but she is happy to order another. She sends a note with her check. When she can turn her back on some very unpleasant people who work on the ranch, she writes, she will come for my advanced techniques class. This greatly flatters me. So much interest in gourmet Chinese cuisine!

It is true that my classes are growing larger. Almost double since that cable station cancels my program. Why am I canceled? Maybe station thinks American viewers are too stupid to prepare any dish having more subtlety than chop suey. No, please, do not groan. This is not what I think. Maybe this humble chef, I admit, does go too far too fast. Maybe I should say a message, like on cigarette packages, before each demonstration. WARNING: This fine delicious dish could be hazardous to somebody's health.

Truth is, on that particular program that so offends the cable station, I do say a warning before preparing Spicy Pork With Long Hot Peppers. I say, if you remember, this dish is not for everyone. Very spicy, very hot. When you mince hot peppers with Chop Chop, stand back, the fumes can knock you over! Maybe I should be stern, not laugh when I say this. Maybe the hah hah is a big mistake. Maybe it is also a mistake

to tell whole world of cable viewers that you must use dark soy sauce in preparing dish. Dark soy sauce is so strong it can hide even infusion of arsenic. That is joke, but maybe it is not good to be humorous all the time.

If you remember the story newspapers print when Mr. Muldoon is arrested, he gives this unfortunate girl an electric wok as a present. Seems Mr. Muldoon is bored with this girlfriend, but she knows about a small robbery in his past. Stubborn girl won't let him go. They fight, they make up. She gets wok, is a peacemaking gift. Tsk, tsk. Now she has eternal peace.

Mr. Muldoon writes me from jail, a fan letter. He is great admirer of Chinese cuisine and my humble contribution. He does not blame me, even in court. He makes notes from my TV show, but this time he gets it wrong. As defense lawyer says, Mr. Muldoon has trouble reading his own handwriting. I say "anise" as ingredient, Mr. Muldoon writes down "arsenic." Then tells girlfriend to put head directly over wok as she stirs hot peppers. Pepper mixed with arsenic fumes make her pass out. Coroner says she dies by inhaling toxic fumes. Oh, that clumsy Mr. Muldoon! Totally unnecessary. Poor girl

would get dizzy, shaky, just from pepper fumes, could fall and crack head. Everyone knows kitchen is dangerous place, many accidents.

Maybe in jail he will learn a good lesson. Or so I tell detectives who come visit me and ask station for video of that one cooking show. No blame to me, they finally decide. I must ask you, my students, is her untimely demise really my fault? I hear shouts of no, no! Thank you, class. Maybe I should never be humorous again during cooking session. But, after all, we are here to have a good time while we learn, right? Right!

Some of you have asked about my private classes, now that I am no longer on television. Well, I offer big classes, like today, and very small classes to a fortunate few who can afford them. Very discreet classes, if you are embarrassed to have a cooking hobby.

Please understand, I want to offer all my classes at little or no charge, but I am not a rich chef. I never like to cook the sweet-and-sour pork and egg roll like in usual Chinese res-

taurant. Even in Hong Kong, I cook for small private parties until I think it is a good idea to leave that city.

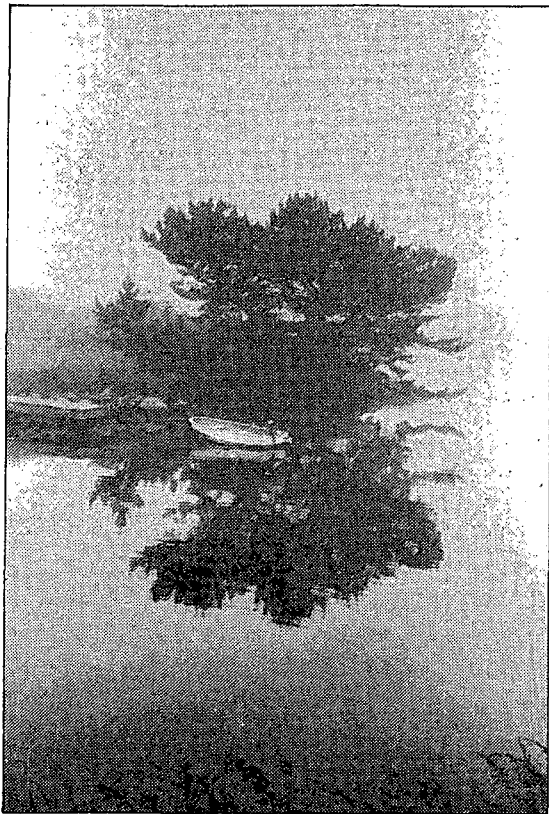
And the ingredients I use are the best, very unusual, often rare. You will see. Mushrooms and fungus, surprising edible flowers, strange fish that is sometimes poisonous and sometimes not. Oh, and of course, mysterious herbs that you never find in ordinary Chinese markets. Whole world of undreamed of delicacies, just for your delight!

Have you put your name on my mailing list? Check the box if you want to get my new newsletter. All about upcoming classes, special offers, even chef's exclusive cooking tips.

Please talk to me after lunch to sign up for advanced class. We will discuss fees, depending on which intriguing dishes you wish to learn. And, of course, please see my willing, patient assistant to buy your Chop Chop after the lunch break. Only twenty-nine, ninety-five, very special price.

And now, before you are all so hungry you want to chop *me* into small, even pieces, hah, hah! let's serve lunch!

# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

Smugglers' Cove, probably. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Please label your entry "September Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the April Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.

FICTION

# True Love

B. K. Stevens

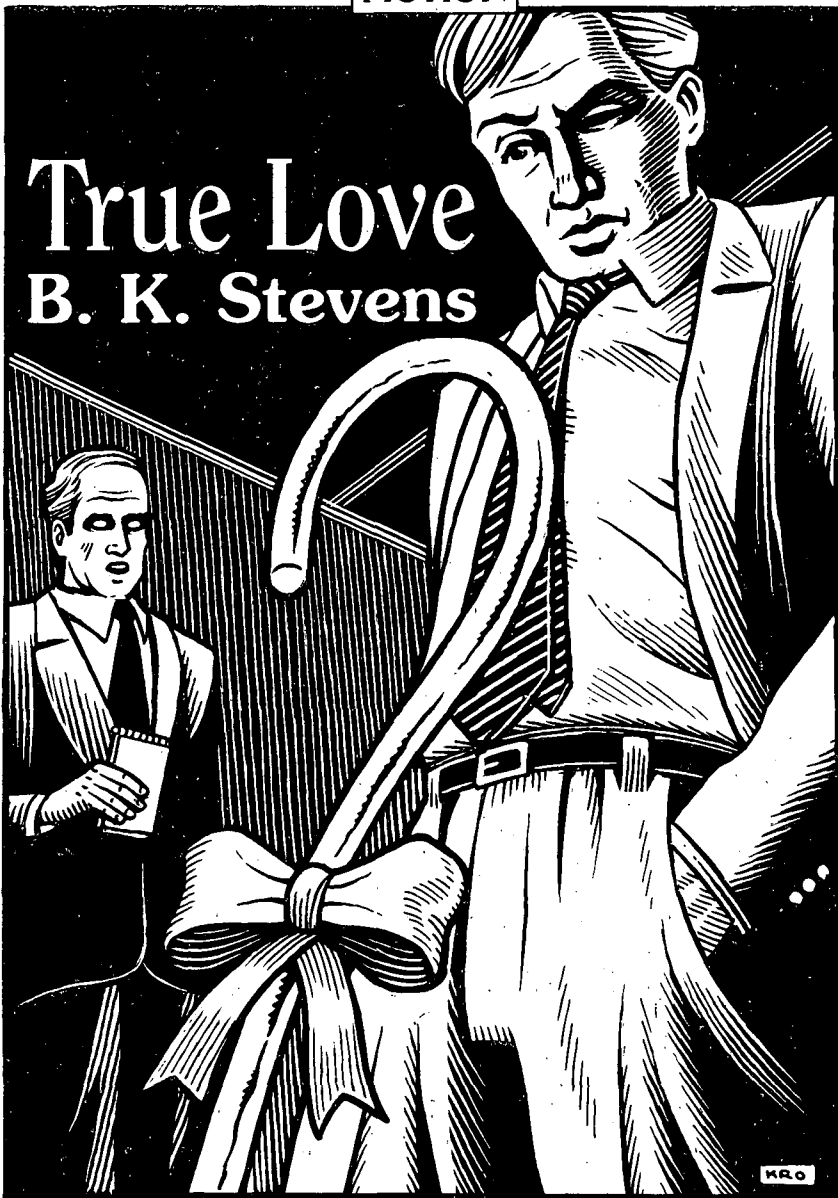


Illustration by Dan Krowatin

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**D**ear Mother,  
I thought you knew me better than that. Oh, I can imagine the letter Bolt wrote to you about the Martin case—praising me, giving me all the credit for figuring everything out, carrying on like I'm a pure clone of Sherlock Holmes. And I can understand how you'd want to believe that he was at least partly right this time, that this time I had at least a little something to do with solving the case. After all, you're my mother. You love me, and you want to think I'm not a complete washout as a detective. It's natural for you to want to believe that. It's sweet.

But you know it's not true.

I hate to admit it, but this time was just like all the others. I stumbled around blind, not noticing half the clues, misinterpreting the ones I did notice, heading straight in the wrong direction. Not Bolt, though. As always, he noticed everything, interpreted everything just right, shoved me smack up against the murderer. Good old Bolt. The only things he ever misinterprets are the things I say. He took all my dumb comments and somehow transformed them into brilliant deductions, so that the case was solved before I knew what was going on, and he was honestly convinced, like al-

ways, that it was all my doing. No, Mother. Sorry, but I don't deserve any credit for this case, either—even though Bolt thinks I do, and he's made the whole department think I do, and I may get promoted because of it.

I should be used to all that by now, but what makes it especially embarrassing is that this time I had a real headstart on Bolt: You could say I got a sneak preview of all the suspects, and the victim, the day before the murder.

Here's how it happened. See, Ellen and I have been having trouble with Kevin—and I know he's your favorite grandson, and God knows nobody loves that kid more than I do, but the fact is, he's been lying. Oh, nothing major—we ignored it the first few times, figuring it was a stage, it'd pass—but then his math teacher called. Kevin hadn't turned in his homework, and he'd said the dog ate it, and the teacher wanted to make sure. Well, you know as well as I do, Mother, old Prince has been dead for three years. Maybe that's why this lie set me off—it didn't seem respectful, somehow, to old Prince's memory. Ellen and I decided we had to punish Kevin, so we pulled him out of Little League for the month. Maybe that was extreme—Little League's his



life, almost, even though he hasn't had a hit since April—but it was a serious lie and it deserved serious punishment.

We tried to make him see we still love him, that we'd done it *because* we love him, but the only response we got was snarling and sulking. So on Saturday Ellen got the idea of taking him to lunch at his favorite restaurant, as a goodwill gesture or what have you. Well, it was like it was a concession for him to even go—he wouldn't smile at us, or say more than "yes" or "no" or "I guess" to us, or even look at us, hardly. Let me tell you, we were one happy little family by the time we got to Bo-Peep's.

I don't know if you have Bo-Peep's in your part of the country yet, Mother, but around here they're real popular—hardly surprising, since Bo-Peep's got started here, and they're owned by the wealthiest, best-liked family in town. Old Daniel Martin opened the first restaurant about twenty years ago, soon after he came over from England. He was a smart, original kind of guy. He saw how popular fast-food restaurants are in this country, but figured people must be getting sick of nothing but beef and chicken and maybe the time was right for a chain featuring lamb. So he founded Bo-

Peep's, and today there are at least fifty franchises, four right in town.

The restaurants are bright green—like a meadow, to get you in the mood—and out in front is a twice-as-big-as-life statue of Little Bo-Peep, made out of plaster or something and holding a stainless steel shepherdess's crook. (By the way—this is important later—the crook isn't attached to the statue. It slides into Bo-Peep's hand, and whenever prom night comes around, some drunk kid is bound to steal a crook, and the next morning we're bound to find it jammed into the roof of some principal's Volvo, and the Bo-Peep's people have to come up with a new crook. What a shame. If Kevin ever did anything like that, I'd pull him out of Little League for more than a month, believe me.)

Anyway, they're very cute restaurants, very classy. The employees wear wool sweaters, and hats with fuzzy little ears, and wrap-around aprons so that—you guessed it—they can be wagging their tails behind them. And the food's great. The kids go for the Lamburgers, of course, and for grownups you've got Chop-on-a-Stick and Baa-Baa-Ka-Bobs; and no matter what you order, you get a free order of Mutton Munchies

if the server forgets to ask, "You want mint jelly with that?"

Well, not five minutes after we settled into our booth—Kevin still not talking to us—the whole Martin family trooped in. That's been a tradition, like, ever since they started the chain: they show up unexpectedly at one of the restaurants, wave and smile at customers, and sit down to a family meal. It makes eating at Bo-Peep's all the more fun because you never know when you'll get a glimpse of them. It sure got *me* excited to see them sitting just across the aisle. I waved like crazy, and Trudy Martin actually looked right at me and gave me one of her sweeter-than-hell smiles. I'd recognized her right off—I've seen that round, beaming face and those fluffy blonde curls a million times on TV, in reports about benefit concerts and charity auctions and such. She's real heavy into good works.

She's what you'd call the matriarch of the family. Her first husband, old Daniel, died seven years ago of a heart attack—brought on, everybody said, by too much gin and too much worrying about the restaurant chain, which was in deep financial trouble at the time. But after Daniel died, his

head accountant, Claude Unser, stepped in. He straightened out the money troubles in no time, and in just a little more than no time, he married Trudy and became the stepfather to her five kids.

Claude was at Bo-Peep's that Saturday, of course—the whole family always shows up at these surprise visits. So I got a good look at his narrow face and broad smile—he looked so friendly, the way he smiled and smiled—and I got a good look at the kids, too. It was a pure treat to watch them. You could just see pride pouring out of Trudy's eyes, and the kids—well, they couldn't do enough for their mother, not any of them. The minute her supply of mint jelly ran low, or it looked like maybe she could use another napkin, those kids jumped up, all but tripping over each other as they scrambled to get whatever she needed. She'd smile, and those kids would just melt. They all plain adored her, and she adored them right back, and that's a clear fact.

As for the stepfather, Claude, he was getting his share of adoration, too—from Trudy, who beamed at him whenever she took a break from beaming at her kids, and from the kids as well. Every time he spoke, they nodded and smiled, competing

to see who could agree most loudly. Well, four of them did. The youngest, Dan, seemed to be holding back, not saying much and sometimes looking away with a sort of bitter grin. He was darker than the other kids, built on a smaller frame—he took after his late father, the others all favored Trudy—and I'd heard he'd been away at Harvard almost the whole time since his father's death, had come home just last month with an MBA in his pocket. Plus I'd heard he had a drinking problem—again like his dad. Put it all together, it's no wonder he wasn't in sync with the rest of them.

Anyhow, on the whole, you couldn't wish to see a happier, more loving family. I'll admit it made me envious. I mean, here Ellen and I were, trying our honest best to bring Kevin up right, and he was treating us like we were the parents from the Black Lagoon, like he was the poster boy for National Child Abuse Prevention Week. When we left Bo-Peep's, I took a last look at the Martins all cosy and loving and wondered what their secret was, what Ellen and I were doing wrong.

Well, that was Saturday. It sure didn't prepare me for what happened at five o'clock Sunday morning. The phone next to our bed rang, and Ellen

rolled over and muttered something about no woman with an I.Q. above seventy ever marrying a cop, and I picked up the receiver. It was the captain saying there was a "situation" at the Bo-Peep's warehouse, and Bolt was already there, and he'd called the captain, and maybe I'd better head over. Thanks a bunch, captain, I thought, pulling on my clothes—and thank *you* a bunch, too, Bolt. No matter what kind of accident or burglary there'd been at this warehouse, it couldn't justify disturbing a homicide lieutenant on his one day a week to sleep in.

When I arrived at the two story brick structure, Bolt was pacing outside. (By the way, Mother, he's looking fine—a little greyer, but in better shape than ever. I think it was a great idea, you two getting started on weightlifting during your last visit.) The lines in his forehead smoothed out when he saw me.

"What a relief, sir," he said, hurrying over to shake my hand. "I hated to disturb you on your one morning to sleep in, but this case is much too complex for *me* to handle. Will you come this way, lieutenant? The body's downstairs."

Well. A body. That might make it worth my time. Bolt led the way down a narrow, nonde-

script hallway and opened the heavy door at the end. I started to follow him down the metal stairs—and then froze, catching my first glimpse of a sight that made me wish they'd dragged me out of bed for a standard-issue burglary after all. At the bottom of the stairs lay the youngest Martin child, Dan Junior, flat on his back. His eyes were closed, his face peaceful—he might've been napping if it hadn't been for the coroner bending over him, and the twice-as-big-as-life stainless steel shepherdess's crook sticking out of his chest.

"Oh Lord," I breathed. "Oh no. What a tragedy."

"A tragedy in the true sense, sir," Bolt agreed solemnly.

He was echoed by a heavy-set, sixty-or-so man standing behind the coroner. The man was wearing a bright green smock with the Bo-Peep's logo on the back, and he was wiping his eyes.

"Yup, it's a tragedy," he said, hardly able to speak for sniffing. "Accidents like this always are. I found him when I came in to start my shift. Dan's the night watchman—all the kids work for the company—and I guess he took it into his head to move the extra shepherdess's crooks to the storage area. We always keep spares on hand, and what with prom sea-

son coming up, we got a shipment in this week, half a dozen of them, and stuck them in the entryway upstairs. Dan must've decided that didn't look seemly and figured he'd carry them down one at a time—they're real heavy—and he must've slipped, and impaled himself, and—Lord! He shouldn't ought to have tried it, not drunk as he sometimes got when he was here alone at night."

He broke down in sobs, and I couldn't blame him. That sweet family—I'd seen them just hours ago, all smiling and happy, and now they were going to be crushed by this horrible, stupid accident. Still, I couldn't help reflecting that they'd made a mistake giving Dan the night watchman's job, considering his drinking problem and all. It just follows that someone with a job like that might get to feeling isolated and depressed, might hit the bottle even harder. "This seems like sort of an odd job choice for him," I couldn't help saying.

Bolt nodded emphatically and jotted it in his notebook, so I knew I'd made a good point. I looked down sadly at the body. There wasn't much blood, not nearly as much as you'd expect; at least the family wouldn't be shocked by a gory corpse when they identified him. I stooped

down for a closer look—homicide lieutenants always have to get a closer look, even when the cause of death is absolutely obvious—and was assaulted by the stench of gin. I gagged. I couldn't help myself.

"Wow," I said, too overcome to be tactful. "This stinks."

"It certainly does, lieutenant," Bolt agreed readily. "It stinks to high heaven. You've noticed the flask, of course."

Of course I hadn't. The coroner saw my confusion, smirked, and pointed to the silver flask peeking out of Dan's pocket. "Half full. I took a preliminary sniff. In my professional opinion, brandy. But there's a gin bottle on the desk."

The desk. I looked up blankly at Bolt. "Mr. Dan Martin's desk, sir. This way."

He led me to a closetlike office near freezers stocked with stacks of chops. The desk was pretty crowded, what with a computer monitor and keyboard, and a framed photo of a grinning teenaged Dan standing in front of the first Bo-Peep's with his dad, and a Mr. Coffee machine still switched on and hot, and a big mug half full of cold coffee—and an empty gin bottle. What a shame, I thought, looking at the coffeemaker and mug.

"So he was trying to sober up," I said to Bolt, "but he was too late to save his life."

"Much too late, I'd say," Bolt agreed. "Of course we'll have to wait for the coroner's report to be sure."

Well, that struck me as dumb, Mother (no offense to your boyfriend, if it's fair to call Bolt that, and I do wish you'd break down and tell me). I mean, how much could the coroner's report tell us? It wouldn't be a revelation to find out that a man with a twelve foot stainless steel shepherdess's crook sticking out of him had died of a chest injury, or that a man reeking of gin had been drunk when he fell down the stairs. I turned to the smocked, sniffing shift manager. "Has the family been notified?" I asked. "Is someone coming over?"

He blew his nose softly. "I called the house," he said. "But nobody's coming. The kids all figure they should stay with their mother, to help her through the shock, and of course Mrs. Trudy can't come; it'd kill her, seeing her son like this. And Mr. Claude—the stepfather—left town on a business trip last night. But Miss Olivia said she'd call him right away, and *he'll* come take charge of things. He's a real take-charge guy."

Well, we could hardly stand there whistling until Claude Unser got back from wherever-

it-might-be. We had to talk to the rest of the family, get background—the captain loves background, even in a routine accident report. We'd need details about when Dan Martin left for work, if he was already drunk, stuff like that. I looked wistfully at Bolt, hoping he'd volunteer to interview the family on his own and spare me from witnessing their grief. But Bolt was silent, staring at the computer on the desk all broody-like. I sighed. I'd have to take a drive to the Martin house after all. Yes, I told myself firmly. Much as I hated the thought of it, a drive to the Martin house was the next logical step. I'd just make myself say it.

"A drive—" I began.

Bolt slapped his leg. "Of course, sir! The A-drive in Mr. Dan's computer! Why didn't I think of it? I'll check at once!"

He pushed the little button-thing next to the A-drive, and out popped a disk labeled BOPEEP'S FINANCIAL RECORDS—1988. Bolt looked deliriously happy.

"And here I was," he said, shaking his head remorsefully, "wondering how we'd ever know what Mr. Dan was doing just before he died—and you, with your superior insight, your invincible logic, hit immediately upon the solution.

Check the A-drive! Thank you, sir! And forgive me for being so slow!"

Before I'd half followed what he'd said, he'd switched on the computer, snapped the disk back in place, punched some keys. Columns of meaningless figures appeared on the screen.

I squinted. "Can you make any sense out of that?" I asked, not really knowing why it'd matter whether he could or not. Dan Martin had gotten drunk and tumbled down some stairs and landed on the wrong end of an oversized shepherdess's crook—what did that have to do with numbers on a screen?

Bolt shrugged. "Oh well. I make no pretense to expertise, but I do take night courses, you know, and I've dabbled in accounting. And once, embarrassed as I am to admit it, Sergeant Lee and I indulged in a beer and became giddy, and he wagered I couldn't pass the CPA exam. I must say, I took considerable satisfaction in collecting that five dollars from him. Well! Shall I take the disk along when we question the family?"

"Better dust it for prints first," I said—that's always a safe thing to say when you don't know what the hell is going on. I passed the coroner on my way out. She winked.

"I'll put a rush on the tests, lieutenant," she said, "and get the results to you right away. I'm sure you're curious."

Talk about sarcasm. As though I needed to be told the cause of death, or cared much about the time. But she's always treating me like I'm stupid. "Just as curious as you are," I said, sorry I couldn't think of a snappier comeback.

Bolt joined me in my car, looking bubbly. "No clear prints on the disk, sir," he said, pocketing it. "I'm sure there's at least one computer at the Martin house; perhaps I can examine the disk further there."

I didn't care for that idea—I like to have Bolt right beside me when I'm questioning people, to figure out what their answers mean (and, frankly, what my questions mean). "Okay," I said uneasily. "But stick close. I may need you."

He looked surprised. "In case someone turns violent, you mean? I'm flattered—but surely, younger officers would be of more assistance in that case. I *will* stick close, however, since you wish it, and since I get such instruction from watching you work." He shook his head. "I am amazed, as always, by your ability to see to the heart of a case immediately. I will never forget, sir, the first words you spoke, only moments after

seeing Mr. Dan's body—'What a tragedy.' You saw instantly that his death was not an accident—no mere accident, however sad, can rise to the level of tragedy. Aristotle tells us that, does he not, sir? What told you that Mr. Dan had been murdered? Was it that a man falling down a flight of stairs would be unlikely to land flat on his back? Or that he couldn't very well impale himself on a shepherdess's crook unless he'd been carrying it pointed at his chest? Or was it the lack of blood?"

Believe me, Mother, by now I was feeling a lack of blood, in my head. "Yeah, it was stuff like that," I said, trying to sound like I'd followed it. "It seemed fishy, you know?"

Bolt chuckled. "Fishy—or as you so succinctly remarked after examining the body, 'This stinks.' And, of course, he reeked of gin but had brandy in his flask, suggesting someone might have simply splattered the gin on him to reinforce the idea that he'd been so drunk he couldn't walk down a flight of stairs. We can't be sure, of course, until the coroner's report tells us what and how much Mr. Dan had actually consumed, but the brandy remaining in the flask and the coffee on the desk are hardly



consistent with the gin-drinking theory, are they?"

"Hardly," I said. Now that you mention it, I thought.

"And what," Bolt went on, "alerted you to the tensions in the family? Was it the lack of signs of forced entry, suggesting Mr. Dan opened the door for his killer—or that the killer had his or her own key? Was it that the family made a night watchman of a son with an MBA from Harvard? As you remarked, that was an odd job choice. Surely, the family could have found a better use for his skills. So! What is your assessment of the case?"

Thank God we'd arrived at the house, so I didn't have to answer. "I'll know more after I talk to the family," I said.

Bolt nodded in approval. "Always thorough," he said, patting me on the shoulder. "Always modest. I must control my curiosity, then. But please, sir—don't make me wait too long before sharing your conclusions with me."

I could have shared all my conclusions right then—that Dan Martin was dead, and that I didn't have an idea in hell about how or why. But it would be a tad embarrassing to admit that, so I just nodded wisely as I pulled up in the long curved driveway leading to the Martin house.

Frankly, I didn't care much for the house. Oh, it's big, all right, and obviously expensive, and probably distinctive. It's supposed to look like a fortress, I guess—basically, a huge, squat rectangle of grey concrete, with no windows facing the street, and just one narrow door, and nothing else to break the monotony except some maroon frieze-thing around the top, made of something that looks like plastic but probably isn't, with *M* carved into it over and over. All in all it looked like the back of a grocery store; I half expected to spot a dumpster off to the side and an aproned cashier sneaking a smoke.

When we knocked on the door, it was opened by a tall, muscular man of thirty-five or so. It was Larry Martin—the oldest Martin child, the one I knew most about. He's built up quite a record with us ever since he dropped out of high school, for getting in fights at bars and for punching out cops who stop him for speeding—maybe twenty arrests, but no convictions, no trials, not even any formal plea bargains, just a few minutes in jail each time and then, whoosh, he's out. I must know more than a hundred cops, and I don't know one who hasn't at some point made a joke about Larry's being the

black sheep of the Bo-Peep family (and don't get upset, Mother, because I don't think the jokes are racist—how could they be when Larry's just as blond as the rest of the family?). He looked us over and scowled.

"You damn well better not be reporters," he said.

His tone made me glad I didn't major in journalism. "We're police officers, Mr. Martin," I said. "We've come from the warehouse. I'm sorry for your loss, but I've got some questions."

"It's a hell of a lousy time to come bothering us," he said, but stepped aside to let us in. Before I could get one foot over the threshold, a young woman came running down the hall behind him. She rushed past him, grabbed the door, and pushed it most of the way shut, nearly knocking me in the face.

"Are you *crazy*, Larry?" she demanded. "Letting *outsiders* in, at a time like this? Don't you know that's *always* when they come after you, when you're most vulnerable?"

She was about thirty, very dramatic-looking, very tall and pale, her long blonde hair parted straight down the middle and pulled back hard in a ponytail, her eyes dark and huge.

Larry shrugged sheepishly. "They're cops, sis," he said. "We gotta let 'em in."

She sneered. "I suppose you *know* they're cops? I suppose you saw their badges? Think, Larry! They could be industrial spies! They could be from—dear God!—from *McDonald's*!"

He shrugged again, apologizing, and backed away to let her take over. She looked me straight in the eyes. "I'm Olivia Martin," she said, "head of security for Bo-Peep's Family Restaurants. Badges and identification, please. And please don't try anything. I warn you—I'm armed."

Well, I wasn't real comfortable with that, but I didn't see as I had any right to make her surrender her weapon in her own home, especially since she was a security officer. We handed over our I.D.'s, and she slammed the door and kept us waiting for a solid twenty minutes—I guess she was making calls, checking us out. When she came back, she thrust our I.D.'s in our hands.

"These papers *seem* legitimate," she said. "But they don't tell me who you might *really* be working for. Cops can be bought—don't think I don't know that—and there isn't a fast-food chain in the country that wouldn't pay millions for

our mint jelly recipe. So. Why are you here, supposedly?"

"Just to get background for our report," I said soothingly. "May we come in, see the whole family?"

She motioned us in impatiently, then led the way to a huge oak-paneled family room. The carpet is rust-colored and thick, the back wall is dominated by a wet bar so well-stocked it makes you thirsty just to look at it, deep plush sofas surround an enormous built-in television on the east wall, and the west wall is lined with enough monitors and screens and other electronic stuff to make Captain Kirk feel right at home.

Rose Martin sat at one of the monitors, her fingers moving hungrily over the controls, her eyes fixed on the screen. She's shorter and stockier than her sister but just as pale, her short flaxen hair plastered straight back from her forehead and tucked severely behind her ears. She didn't look up as we walked in.

"Just shut up," she said brusquely. "Just nobody say anything. I'm almost to the last level."

Well, after that I wasn't about to disturb her. I sneaked a peek at her monitor, though: she was playing some computer game, and there were a dozen

or more decapitated knights lying at the feet of a wizard who was busily hacking the limbs off yet another knight. Every time the wizard's sword connected with an arm or a leg, big gobs of blood oozed down the screen, and the "Hallelujah Chorus" played, and Rose smiled.

It got me hypnotized, almost, just watching, so it was a few moments before I realized there was another person in the room. Finally, though, the sniffing and crunching caught my attention. I looked across the room and saw a man huddled on the largest sofa, wiping his swollen eyes with a napkin, dipping Doritos into a jar of peanut butter and stuffing them in his mouth three at a time. It was Gilbert Martin, Rose's twin. He looks pretty much like all the other Martin kids—and what I mean by that is he looks pretty much like *all* the other Martin kids, rolled into one and doubled for good measure.

He pushed a wad of fair hair away from his face and moaned. "*Outsiders?*" he said reproachfully, looking at Olivia. "*Now?*"

"They're cops," Olivia said, walking over to pat his shoulder. "Or so they say. Where did Larry go?"

"Upstairs," Gilbert said, stuffing a fresh load of Doritos into his mouth and sobbing. "To check on Mother. I should be with her, too, but I can't stand it when she's so sad. Claude's the only one who can comfort her when she's like this. Oh God! Where is Claude? Mother needs him. *I need him!*"

She patted his shoulder again. "We *all* need him, Big Guy," she said tenderly. "Don't worry—he'll be home any minute."

I tell you, it made me misty. Apparently all the kids still lived at home. That seemed downright sweet. After all the troubles Ellen and I were having with Kevin, it was nice to meet a family that wasn't feuding and fragmented. And you read so much about how hard it is for kids to accept stepparents, but that was no problem here. These kids loved and depended on their stepdad. And Bolt thought someone in *this* family was a killer?

I turned to him reproachfully. "You see how close these kids are?" I whispered. "How dependent they are on each other?"

"Very dependent," he agreed softly. "Very codependent—that's the current phrase, is it not? Or perhaps interdependent would say it better. They clearly encourage and feed

upon each other's weaknesses. And they're clearly keeping close about something, as you say."

That made no sense, but I didn't have time to ask what he meant. There was a whoop from Rose Martin. "Damn!" she cried. "I'd *made* it—I'd *slaughtered* all the stupid knights—and then that damn dragon pops up and fries my wizard. It's not *fair!*"

Olivia scurried over to comfort her. "I know it, sweetie," she said. "*Nothing's* fair. They control everything and never let you win, and they make sure it's never fair."

I couldn't quite follow her pronouns—I just hoped I wasn't part of "they." And then Trudy Martin walked into the room wearing a fleecy white bathrobe, her son Larry tagging behind her. She gave me a sad but lovely smile and held out a hand.

"My son says you've come about poor Dan," she said, fresh tears bubbling up in her eyes as she spoke. "How kind of you to be concerned. Have the children introduced themselves?"

Wow. What a sweet lady. You could just feel the niceness oozing out of her. "Well, Miss Olivia did," I said. "She told us she's head of security. And we met Mr. Larry—"

"Our head accountant," she said, gazing at him proudly. "And that's Rose and Gilbert, our policy review directors."

"Yeah," Rose said, picking up a hand-held computer game and fiddling with the buttons. "Whenever Claude makes a new policy, he sends it to our office, and we review it."

"Then we file it," Gilbert put in, his eyes lighting up a bit. "And every six months, we take out *all* the policies and—"

"—review them again, and file them again," Rose finished.

I nodded, impressed. It sounded real important. "And you check for problems, suggest changes, stuff like that?"

Rose looked confused. "There are *never* any problems—"

"—and we *never* need to suggest changes," Gilbert said. "Claude makes good policies. And we have a *big* office."

"Yeah, though it's not like we have to go there every *day*," Rose said. "We're not *slaves*. We're *executives*."

"Yes, you are, darlings," Trudy said, beaming at them. "Every one of you. Now, how can we help, lieutenant?"

"We just have a few questions, Mrs. Martin—I mean, Mrs. Unser," I said. "For our report and all. Now, did any of you see Dan before he left for work last night?"

"Why, we *all* did," she said, her eyes widening. She's a nudge past middle age, but damned attractive—figure still intact, face still unlined. "We all had dinner together, as always. Claude cooked a leg of lamb—it's my favorite—and Larry experimented with a new curry sauce, and Olivia's potatoes were *so* crisp, and Gilbert helped Rose make a *marvelous* apple pie."

"He didn't help *much*," Rose said, grumpily. "He mostly just sat there nibbling at the dough, and snarfing down apples faster than I could peel them."

"And *I* fixed the carrot sticks," Trudy said, looking up at Larry for approval. "And they *did* turn out well, didn't they?"

"You bet they did, Mother," he said, kissing her forehead affectionately. "Nobody cuts 'em straighter than you."

"And Dan brought the wine," Olivia added darkly, "and drank most of it himself."

"So Mr. Dan started drinking even before he left the house," I said, seizing at this first bit of relevant information. "And he had a lot, did he?"

"He *always* had a lot," Larry said, heating up. "I mean, speak no ill, but it's a fact. Two beers during the afternoon, a scotch when we sat down for cocktails, three glasses of wine

at dinner—five drinks in all. No wonder he had an accident later.”

I shook my head. Dan Martin came from such a happy, loving family, yet he still drank far more than he should. Why? There didn't seem to be any explanation for it. “It just doesn't add up,” I mumbled, and saw Bolt nod in agreement.

“Yeah,” Larry said, heating up even more. “And he was getting obnoxious and saying nutty things and—”

“Please!” Gilbert covered his ears with his hands and moaned. “Do we *have* to dredge up all that? You'll just get Mother upset again. Do you *want* to see her cry?”

“There, there, baby.” Trudy scurried over, looking like she wanted to sit down and embrace him. But there wasn't enough room left on the sofa, so she contented herself with stroking his hair. She looked up, eyes teary but proud. “Gil's so sensitive—such a *nice* boy. You *hate* it when I'm sad, don't you, baby?”

Gilbert sobbed in agreement, and she took a candy bar from her bathrobe pocket and slipped it to him. He gobbled happily. “Anyway,” she said, “Dan *did* say some wild things—poor little Gil got so upset he had to leave the room, couldn't even stay for dessert

—but we don't *blame* poor Dan, do we, children? It was just the drink talking. Dan was a sweet boy, too, but the drink was too much for him, sometimes. Just like his father—poor dear! And we loved them both all the same—didn't we, darlings?”

Olivia had to run over and hug her. “Oh, Mother!” she cried. “If that isn't *just* like you! Never a harsh word for anybody, no matter what! You're so *good*!”

Trudy smiled placidly. “Well, I do try to be *nice*,” she said. “I do like things *peaceful*, and *pleasant*. I do like it when we all get *along* with each other—it's all I've *ever* asked.”

Poor lady—to ask for so little, and get even less. I turned to Bolt again, thumping my hand lightly against my heart. “It gets you right here, doesn't it?” I said softly.

He nodded sympathetically and pulled a roll of antacid tablets out of his pocket. “Yes, it gets you in the chest,” he agreed, “but it starts in the stomach. Here, sir. Try these. They always help *me* when I feel nauseated.”

He swallowed a few tablets himself before passing the roll to me. I looked at it in confusion, then spoke to Trudy again. “So,” I said, “Mr. Dan said unpleasant things at dinner?”

Rose yawned. "Yeah, but it was nothing. I mean, it was ancient history. I mean, so what? Who even *cares* any more?"

"Yeah, ancient history can be rough," I said, remembering that course you made me take in tenth grade. Bolt nodded, so I figured he'd had trouble keeping track of the Phoenicians and Greeks and things, too. "So then what happened?"

"Then Dan left the table," Trudy said. "He didn't stay for dessert, either. So I went up to his room a little later and took him a slice of pie and a glass of milk, but he just had one bite and one sip and left for work."

She sighed heavily, and Gilbert reached up to pat her hand, and Olivia gave her another hug, and Rose looked up from the computer game long enough to blow her a kiss. Larry gazed at his mother sadly, then cleared his throat. "Then I drove Claude to the airport around eight and went straight to a bar called Winners. You can ask the bartender, Max—he knows me real well. Then I went to another bar, The Works, and I picked up a girl named Rita Fox, and we went to her place on Forty-fifth. I didn't get back home until about four in the morning."

"And Mother went up to bed soon after Claude and Larry

left," Olivia added. "She never stays up late when Claude's not home. Gilbert went up around ten, but Rose and I stayed in the family room. We were together the whole time—I was watching my tape of *JFK* again, and she was playing Wizard Whackers."

"Yeah," Rose said. "I made it to the fourth level that time. We finally went to bed around two."

Let me tell you, Mother, when you've been a cop as long as I have, nothing pleases you more than folks who come forward with such clear, complete accounts of their actions. "Thanks," I said. "That tells us a lot."

Bolt chuckled quietly. "Quite a lot indeed," he whispered. "Volunteering alibis when none were requested, anxiously establishing their whereabouts when they supposedly believe their brother died in an accident—as if we'd care about what they'd been doing if it really *were* an accident, or blame them for not being stationed at the bottom of the stairs when he fell! 'That tells us a lot'—oh, your wit, sir! Your sly, devastating wit!"

Well, that did it. I didn't care if it *would* make me look like a fool, I damn well *had* to ask Bolt what he was talking about. But just then we heard



a car pull up. Trudy and all the kids let out little squeals of joy and ran to the front door, and in a minute Claude Unser was in the room. His arms were full of packages, but he let them all drop as he reached out to embrace his family. They all crowded in, and he had hugs and kind words and sad smiles enough for each of them. All that love and niceness sure didn't leave *my* eyes dry, believe me.

"My poor lambs!" Claude said, his voice dripping tenderness. "What an ordeal you've been through! And I wasn't here to help—I'm so sorry! As soon as I got the dreadful news, I chartered a flight home. I'd have been here sooner, but I wasn't in my hotel when Olivia called. I was shopping, buying glad-to-see-you-again gifts for all of you." He bent down to scoop up packages. "See, Trudy? An electronic massage pillow, to soothe you to sleep whenever any nasty little worries might disturb you. And a box of Godiva chocolates for you, Gilbert."

"My favorites!" Gilbert cried, seizing the box.

Claude smiled at him. "Here's a book for you, Olivia—*Faucets of Fear: The IRS Conspiracy to Wreck Our Water and Weaken Our Wills*. It exposes the government plot be-

hind fluoridation, mind control, and the 1040 form. I got you a book, too, Larry—*The Art of Brawling: 101 Eye Gouges, Choke Holds, and Groin Punches*.

"Thank you!" Larry said, gazing at the book with rapture. "I can't wait to start practicing."

Rose was bouncing up and down. "And you got me a game, didn't you, Daddy? Please! Did you get me a game?"

He pretended to frown for a moment, then smiled broadly. "Yes, I did. Crasher Carnage VI."

"Oh, I've been *wishing* for this!" Rose cried. "It's the one where you can *see* the body parts fly out of the cars!"

She scampered off to snap it in the appropriate gizmo. Claude looked after her fondly, then sobered. "And I got brandy for Dan," he said, picking up the last package sadly. "But now I'll never get a chance to give it to him."

They sobbed in unison, and then Claude looked up, noticing Bolt and me for the first time. "Morticians?" he said hopefully.

"No, sir," I said, stepping forward. "Police officers, investigating young Dan's death." I looked around at the members of his family, all eagerly opening packages and flipping pages. "I just gotta say—you

sure know how to pick gifts. You really understand how to keep these folks happy, don't you, sir?"

"He certainly does," Bolt said, muttering to himself as he scribbled in his notebook. "This surpasses codependency—it is the conscious fostering of vice as a way to maintain control."

"Well, I *hope* I know how to keep them happy," Claude said, smiling. "They're my family—who should understand them better than I? And now, officer, tell me about this accident."

"Glad to," I said, but another car pulled up in the drive, and there was another little commotion. This time, it was two uniformed cops with a sealed envelope from the coroner.

I wasn't real interested and waved them off on Bolt. He ripped the envelope open. "Yes, yes," he said, skimming the report as he spoke. "Odd position of body and shepherdess's crook, half-full flask—yes, yes. Low blood-alcohol content, lividity, superficiality of chest wound, lack of blood—it's a tragedy, sir, as you said. Analysis of remaining contents of Mr. Dan's pocket flask confirms cause of death: massive overdose of Valium mixed with moderate amount of alcohol."

He said it so fast that I didn't absorb all that business about body position and blood and li-

vidity—I never *have* quite understood what lividity is—but I caught the part about Valium. So, obviously, did the family. Olivia turned white, Rose turned red, Gilbert bleated, Trudy sobbed.

And Larry gasped. "You're *sure* it was Valium," he said, "and not—well, and not something else?"

And Claude smiled sadly. "So it was suicide," he said, not missing a beat. "Poor, tormented boy. He was so upset at dinner—we could all see that. After he left the table, he must have hit bottom, decided to end it all, ground up some Valium—"

"Oh, Claude!" Trudy cried. "Do you think he took some of *mine*? It would be so awful if my own Valium killed my baby!"

Claude shrugged. "Yours, or Olivia's, or Larry's, or Rose's, or Gil's—he could have found some in any bathroom in the house, sweetest. The point is, he poisoned his flask, became groggy and disoriented, then stumbled while carrying a crook down the stairs and fell on the point." He turned sadly to us. "Poor Dan never really recovered from his depression after his father's death. He was so close to his father—as was I, as was I."

"You certainly were." Trudy patted his hand. "I remember all the nights you went out drinking with him, trying to comfort him after he'd become so worried about the company's finances and had given up on A.A. Nobody could have been a better friend to poor Daniel than you were—or to poor little Dan."

"I tried, God knows," he said, taking her in his arms. "But I blame myself for not being more sensitive to Dan's misery. Why didn't I see this coming? Oh God! Why didn't I see it?"

It made me feel awful, Mother, seeing them feel so guilty. And the kids—not one had said a word since Bolt told us about the coroner's report. They stood grouped around Gilbert's sofa, all stiff with shock, all silent. Obviously, they were blaming themselves, too, for not realizing how sad their brother was, not reaching out more. It wasn't right. I mean, suicides are so hard to understand. Who knew what finally set Dan off? Maybe it had nothing to do with any of them. I searched for words to comfort them. "Now, you guys all take it easy," I said. "You're making some pretty big assumptions here."

"Indeed they are," Bolt said quietly, handing me the coroner's report. "Such as the as-

sumption that Mr. Dan's death was suicide, and not murder."

That got their attention. Mine, too. I stared at the report, squinted at the lividity bit, tried to make sense of it, gave up, handed the report back to Bolt. "Better explain it to them," I said, real gruff, trying to sound like I could've done it myself, no problem, but didn't feel like bothering.

He nodded briskly, always ready to take a supporting role when the great detective asks. "I won't rehearse the details," he said. "Some people here might find them painful. In brief, the coroner concluded that some time after Mr. Dan died of Valium poisoning, his body was moved and placed at the bottom of the stairs and a shepherdess's crook was thrust into his chest. The inference, clearly, is that someone tried to make his death look like an accident—when, clearly, it was not."

There were assorted gasps—I couldn't tell you just which people they came from, but I know for sure one of them was mine. Claude was the first to collect himself. "Of course it wasn't an accident," he said. "It was suicide."

"Yes, yes," Trudy put in eagerly. "Poor Dan poisoned himself with Valium. You proved that."

"You bet," Larry said, speaking up at last, clenching his fists angrily. "You got no business saying anything else."

"Unless," Olivia said ominously, "you're out to get us. Unless someone's *paying* you to get us."

Rose sighed impatiently. "This is so *stupid*. We've got the answer. Dan was sad, and he killed himself. End of story."

"Maybe," Gilbert suggested quietly, "he left a note."

Finally, a useful idea. If we could find solid proof that Dan had intentionally OD'ed on Valium maybe the coroner would reconsider her conclusions about lividity and stuff, and I'd have a neat little suicide after all and could wrap it up in time to watch *Power Rangers* with Kevin. I turned to Trudy. "If Dan *did* write a suicide note," I said, "where would he leave it?"

Trudy's eyes widened again. "Why, in his room. On his computer. He got it at Harvard, and he used it for *everything*—wrote letters on it, kept his journal on it, *everything*."

"Fine," I said. "Let's check his room."

Claude led the way, and we all trooped upstairs (all but the uniformed cops—I sent them on their way, and let me tell you, I lived to regret it). Claude paused when we reached Dan's

room, then sighed and opened the door. Wow, I thought, peering in. I'll never again scold Kevin about not straightening up. I mean, his room gets pretty rank, but not like this. Bureau drawers hanging open, the floor thick with pants and undershirts and socks, the desk littered with a sticky plate and a crumpled napkin and a milky glass, empty bookshelves staring morosely at heaps of books—it was bad. And it could've been so pretty, too. The bed was on the small side maybe, but the fleecy white spread was thick as could be, and the red bedstead was cute, and the pink bureau, and the lavender desk—and what could be more adorable than the wallpaper, with those fluffy little lambs leaping over white fences and cavorting in sunny green fields?

Trudy sighed sweetly. "This is the nursery," she said. "All our babies started out here. And to think Dan wanted to paint over that *lovely* paper and bring in plain old *brown* furniture! I'm so glad you said no, Claude. At least we know his *room* couldn't have depressed him—it's so *cheerful*."

"Indeed," Claude agreed solemnly, then pointed at the computer. "Go ahead, officers—take a look."

"But that's an invasion of privacy," Olivia cut in anxiously. "It's Dan's personal computer, and he—well, he never gave us permission, so do we have a right to look?"

Claude smiled at her kindly. "If he left a suicide note, you can be sure he wanted us to find it. And it's *our* house, and *I'm* giving the officers permission. It's all right."

Bolt sat down promptly at the computer—he knows I'm not comfortable with technological stuff—and switched it on. He pressed some keys, frowned at the screen, pressed more keys, and turned to me. "Someone must have re-initialized the hard drive. It's been wiped clean—not a file left. I'll consult our computer people, but I doubt anything can be retrieved. The person who erased this hard drive knew what he—or she—was doing."

Another sad, wise smile from Claude. "Obviously poor Dan did it himself. He was leaving this world and didn't wish to have his personal thoughts linger behind him, to be scrutinized by prying eyes. Well, officer! This offers clear proof of suicide, far clearer than a mere note could."

Now, I always try to think the best of people, Mother—you taught me that, when Mrs. Oliphant got sick back in third

grade and you subbed in Sunday school—but I was getting suspicious. I don't trust guys who always have an answer for everything. Maybe that's because I never have an answer for anything, but I can't help it, that's how I am. To me, this guy Claude was starting to seem a little too smooth. And the way he just happened to be out of town when young Dan died—maybe that was supposed to look like an alibi, but it didn't fool *me*. Claude could've poisoned the flask and erased the hard drive before he left, figuring Dan wouldn't drink the brandy and die until Claude's alibi was neatly in place. I couldn't imagine what motive he'd have for killing his stepson or what incriminating evidence could have been on the computer, and some other details (the lividity and stuff) still didn't fit, but for once in my life I was coming up with a theory about a crime, and it felt good. It felt hot.

"Not so fast, Mr. Unser," I said, authoritatively. "Maybe Dan erased the hard drive, and maybe he didn't. Maybe—" here I looked at Claude shrewdly "—someone else did. Maybe we oughtta ask who might've been afraid of something that might've been on that hard drive, and who might've wanted young Dan

dead, and who might've—well, who might've done all the stuff that was done last night. Apparently." I was running out of steam, since I didn't know just what *had* been done last night, and I sure didn't know what to do next. "So," I said, "maybe we oughtta look into this thing more." I turned helplessly to Bolt. "Right?"

"Right, sir," he agreed, and took out the disk he'd found in the warehouse computer's A-drive. "I assume *this* is the thing you'd like to look into more." He slipped it in the computer and touched a few keys, and those numbers popped up again. "Financial records for Bo-Peep's Restaurants—as far as we know, the last thing Mr. Dan looked at before he died. These are records for 1988—the year Daniel Martin, Sr., died of a heart attack brought on by worry about his company's well-being. Is *this* the sort of thing you consider 'ancient history,' Miss Rose? Well, as the lieutenant astutely observed, ancient history can be rough."

"Just a minute," Claude cut in, looking alarmed for the first time. "Those are confidential business records—you have no right to look at them. *Dan* had no right to look at them. I can't imagine how he even got hold of them."

"The safe in the study," Trudy said, turning pale. "Daniel must have given Dan the combination, years ago. They were so *close*—Dan was *always* Daniel's favorite. So *that's* what Dan was talking about at dinner!"

Claude seized her hands and kissed them. "Dan was talking nonsense, my dear—you must believe that. He was a drunkard, like his father. You remember, don't you, how helpless Daniel was, how he depended on me to run the business for him?"

"You bet," Larry said loyally. "Dad was a vision guy—he didn't have a mind for details. Claude does. *He's* the one who can make things work. I mean, Dad never even understood about computers. Why, before Dad died, Claude had to keep a double set of records—one on computer, and one in those big old fashioned ledger things." His face brightened. "Hey! I can go get the big ledger thing for 1988, *show* these dumb cops how much extra trouble you went to for Dad's sake. *That* oughtta satisfy them."

Claude had paled. "Thank you, but your explanation should satisfy them sufficiently—the situation is already clear."

Bolt nodded ominously. "Indeed. We *will* need to see that

ledger eventually, but the disk makes things clear enough." He motioned me over, and I peered at the screen and pretended to study the numbers. "See, sir!" Bolt said. "These records—the *real* records, no doubt, the ones Claude Unser kept for his own use—show Bo-Peep's was in fact in fine financial shape in 1988. It isn't hard, is it, to predict what we'll see when we examine the ledger Mr. Unser kept for Mr. Daniel Martin? The ledger, I'm sure, will indicate the Bo-Peep's empire was about to collapse. And it was that false ledger that drove Mr. Daniel Martin to despair, and to drink, and ultimately to his death."

The numbers didn't make sense to me, but Bolt's explanation did. "So," I said, turning on Claude Unser savagely, "you lied to old Daniel. He was an alcoholic, but he'd gotten his problem under control, he was going to A.A. like Trudy said, he was coping. And you sabotaged him—doctored the records to make him think he was going broke, made things look so desperate that he started hitting the booze again. You even took him out drinking, helping him on the way to a heart attack while pretending to comfort him. You had your eye on his company—and his wife—and you set out to get

them, and you did. You killed him just as sure as if you'd taken out a gun and shot him, then scooped up Bo-Peep's and Trudy, too. And you fooled the whole family, almost, into loving and trusting you, into thinking you were old Daniel's best friend and the man who saved their business."

Trudy clapped her hands over her ears, hard. "Don't *say* those things," she cried, swaying back and forth to a fretful rhythm. "They're not *nice*. They *upset* me."

"Oh God!" Gilbert cried. "He's upset Mother!" All the kids rushed over to surround her with hugs and pats, and she swayed in their midst, her hands still over her ears.

"I'm sorry," I said, "but I gotta say these things—and you better listen. Don't you see? Claude fooled *almost* the whole family—but not quite. Dan Junior must've figured it out. That's probably why he got an MBA, so he could come home and study the records and learn the truth. Claude tried to keep him from getting at the records—made him a night watchman, even though he'd been to Harvard and could've handled something more." Finally I realized why Bolt thought it was so important that Dan Junior had such a lousy job. "But Dan had the combination to the



safe, so he learned the truth anyway," I continued. "Then he had too much to drink to-night—he had his father's weakness—and he blurted it out. And I'll bet it made Claude plenty nervous."

"Nonsense," Claude said. He'd looked shaky for a few minutes, but now he had his composure back. "If I'd lied about the records, if I had horrible secrets to hide from the family, why did I make Larry head accountant when I took over?"

Well, he had a good point, Mother—I could see that. I wasn't about to admit it, though. "Yeah, well, I bet you had your reasons," I said, sounding belligerent but feeling lost, and turned desperately to Bolt again. "Right, sergeant?"

"Right," Bolt said staunchly. "He chose as accountant a high school dropout clearly more intent on brawling than on book-keeping, and clearly not exactly gifted in math. I don't mean to embarrass you, Mr. Larry, but when you described your brother's drinking, you listed two beers, one scotch, and three glasses of wine, and you came up with a total of five drinks. As the lieutenant tactfully remarked, 'It just doesn't add up.'"

It took me a moment to remember when I'd said that and

what I'd meant by it, and another moment to do the math. Then I nodded vigorously. "Yeah, right. You weren't worried about Larry's figuring out what you'd done, were you, Claude? Making him head accountant was the perfect way to cover up what you'd done. But Dan Junior was another matter." Well, that clinched it. I'd found my murderer. I started reaching for my handcuffs, trying to remember how the Miranda warnings go.

"But this is absurd!" Claude protested. "I wasn't even in town when young Dan met his unfortunate end!"

I was ready for that one. "Yeah, you had everything arranged neatly, didn't you?" I shot back. "So it was just a coincidence all this happened when you were out of town, huh? Well, I say it wasn't." I turned to Bolt, proud of how I'd figured out the phony alibi part on my own. "What do you say, sergeant? Was it just a coincidence he was out of town?"

"Indeed not," Bolt said warmly. "I see what you mean, sir. Mr. Unser *did* have everything arranged neatly. Even if young Dan could prove the records had been falsified intentionally, we couldn't have prosecuted Mr. Unser for causing old Daniel's death—the crime was too indirect, too safe. And

even if they'd been made to see the truth, would Mrs. Unser and the children have turned on a man they see as essential to their well-being? As you remarked when he distributed the gifts, he really knows how to keep these folks happy, shielding Mrs. Unser from the unpleasantness she finds so distasteful, putting Miss Olivia in charge of security to feed her paranoia, giving Miss Rose and Mr. Gilbert sinecures that allow them to wallow in sloth, encouraging Mr. Larry to indulge his violent nature and protecting him from any legal consequences. As you say, sir, he had everything neatly arranged. *He* had no reason to fear young Mr. Dan."

"No reason at *all*?" I said, stunned.

Luckily, Bolt was too absorbed in his narration to hear the question mark. "No reason at all," he echoed. "I agree. So, as you said, it was no coincidence that all this happened while he was out of town. Had he been here, he would have controlled the situation. That's his specialty—control. This crime was far too uncontrolled to be *his* work—and far too stupid."

Casually, I slipped my handcuffs back in my pocket. So much for the case against Claude Unser. Maybe I

wouldn't be making an arrest today after all.

Then again, maybe I would. All the time Bolt had been talking, Larry had been growling, his face twisting with rage. Now, suddenly, he advanced on Bolt. "Hey!" he said. "Who you calling stupid?"

"I meant no offense, sir," Bolt said mildly. "I was merely attempting to characterize the crime, to express the opinion that a man of Mr. Unser's subtlety and intelligence would hardly—"

Bolt's quick, but even he didn't see the punch coming (and I won't apologize for telling you this part, Mother, because you've already talked to both Bolt and me, you know it turns out okay). Bolt yanked his head back right at the last second, so the blow just barely connected with his chin. Then, in another second, Bolt went into some kind of stance and let out some kind of yell, and before I could get my eyes refocused he had Larry Martin doubled over, both his arms pinned behind his back.

"Excuse me, lieutenant," he said, not even out of breath. "Could I trouble you for the loan of your handcuffs?"

Then things got crazy. Larry was swearing, Trudy was crying, Claude was negotiating, Olivia was ranting, Gilbert was

hiding his eyes, Rose was waving her fist and cheering Larry on. Even before I got the handcuffs on Larry, the case shaped up again. This was a stupid, uncontrolled crime, Bolt said. That description fit Larry—he wasn't stocking any surplus in either brains or self-control. And he'd been awful eager to volunteer an alibi, and to convince us Dan was drunk enough to tumble down those stairs all on his own. And, come to think of it, if Dan had said nasty things about the way the accounting was handled, and if he was too drunk or too cautious to spell things out clearly, Larry might've thought his brother was accusing *him*. And he'd taken Bolt's remark about the stupidity of the crime as a personal insult. Yes. It all fit. I'd found my murderer.

I snapped the handcuffs shut, and Bolt let Larry straighten up. He glared at me defiantly, and I glared right back. "So," I said, "tell us how it happened. Dan got you steamed at dinner, didn't he? What did you *really* do after you dropped Claude off—go straight to that first bar, or straight to the warehouse? Or did you go to the warehouse between bars, after you'd had a few drinks and gotten *really* steamed? What were you planning to do—punch Dan around,

like you're always punching cops? Or did you have more in mind even then?"

"You creep!" Larry bellowed, trying to shake off Bolt's grip on his arms. "You saying I killed my brother?"

"Calm yourself, Mr. Larry," Bolt said, his own voice so calm you'd think he was in church. "The lieutenant's not saying anything of the sort."

I wasn't? I looked up in surprise but had the sense to keep my mouth shut this time.

"Think, Mr. Larry," Bolt was saying. "He merely said—correctly, I'm sure—that you went to the warehouse. But the murder act didn't take place at the warehouse, did it? Mr. Dan's flask must have been poisoned before he left the house."

Damn. I'd forgotten about the flask, and the Valium—all I'd been able to think about was Dan's body lying at the bottom of the stairs, and how good a quick arrest would look on my record. Well, I'd have to cover as best I could.

"Yeah, right," I said, gruffly. "That's what I meant. So, Larry, tell the truth. What happened at the warehouse?"

All the fight seemed to go out of him. His body went limp, his face sagged, and he looked ready to cry. "I *did* go to the warehouse," he admitted, "after I'd gone to the first bar

and had a few drinks and gotten really steamed, just like you said. But I just wanted to talk to Dan, to—well, maybe I *did* think about hitting him, but I didn't plan on *hurting* him. I mean, I hit people all the time, and they never seem to get hurt much. So I let myself into the warehouse, and there was Dan at his desk, his head resting on his arms, like he was asleep. So I—”

“Larry, stop!” Olivia cried out. “Don't tell them anything more! They'll twist it around and use it to frame you!”

He shook his head. “No, sis. I gotta get this off my chest. So anyhow, I saw Dan sitting there, and it made me burn, thinking of him feeling so peaceful after getting us all so upset. So I yelled something at him, and he didn't even look up, and that *really* made me burn. I mean, what was he doing, ignoring me? I thought he was being really rude.” A tear surfaced. “But now I think maybe he was already dead.”

He sobbed, and Bolt patted him on the shoulder. “It's all right, Mr. Larry. You're almost finished. Just go ahead.”

Larry sobbed once more, then found his voice. “So I ran over to the desk and grabbed him by his shoulders and yanked him to his feet and shook him, and he didn't even

open his eyes. I was so *mad*! I shoved him against the wall, and then I grabbed him by the collar and punched him so hard he fell, and I waited for him to get up, but he didn't. I got scared, then, and I went over and looked at him, and—oh, God!—I felt for a pulse but didn't find any, and I thought I'd killed him.”

“My baby!” Trudy echoed, hiding her face against Claude's shoulder. I didn't know which son she was crying for.

“And then what, Mr. Larry?” Bolt urged.

Larry blinked against his tears. “Then—then nothing. I panicked and ran. I ran to—well, to that second bar I told you about, and I picked up a girl to give myself an alibi.”

Well, that part sounded all right, but it couldn't be the whole story. “That still doesn't tell us who poisoned the flask,” I pointed out, proud to have remembered this time.

“Or who put Mr. Dan's body at the bottom of the stairs and thrust a shepherdess's crook into his chest,” Bolt added.

Damn. I'd forgotten about the shepherdess's crook. Well, Larry must've done that part, too. He thought his punch had killed his brother and wanted to cover up, so he tried to fake an accident. “I don't think you

went to that bar *right* away, did you, Larry?" I demanded. "You did something else first."

"Indeed," Bolt said, nodding. "He went home."

Well, that wasn't what I'd expected to hear. I was still trying to get over that surprise when we all had another surprise to adjust to. Olivia had whipped out her gun.

"I *knew* you'd try to drag the whole family into this," she said, backing away from her shrieking mother and pointing the gun straight at Bolt's head. "That's been your plan all along—to destroy us all, to get the company away from us. Who's paying you? The FBI? The CIA? The Cubans? Newt Gingrich?"

"Olivia, please!" Claude said, not quite as smooth as usual. "Put the gun away. I'll call a lawyer. I'll—"

"Lawyers!" Olivia laughed scornfully. "Burger King owns all the lawyers. I say we handle this ourselves."

"You bet," Rose said, bouncing with glee. "Shoot them, Olivia! Shoot them both! Nobody ever has to know. We'll take the bodies to the warehouse and chop them up and put them through the grinder. We can always use more Lam-burgers."

I hate to be graphic, Mother,

but she *did* say it. Trudy and Gilbert gasped; Claude and Larry blanched; Olivia looked like she might be considering it. "N-now, calm down," I said, so shook up I could barely stutter. "You don't really want to do that, Rose. It's not like you intend—oh." Nausea stopped me mid-sentence.

"I believe the word is Nintendo, sir," Bolt spoke up helpfully. "But on the whole, Miss Rose, the lieutenant makes an excellent point. This is *not* like your Nintendo. You spend so much time locked in a game world where death isn't real and blood is merely decorative, no wonder you find it hard to distinguish between fantasy and reality. Is that what happened when Mr. Larry ran home last night in a panic? Had Mr. Claude been here, Larry would have gone to *him* for help, as usual. But Mr. Claude was out of town, so Mr. Larry turned to his sisters. You and Miss Olivia were still up, as she said. Did Miss Olivia urge Mr. Larry to go to another bar to establish an alibi? And did *you* offer to go to the warehouse to fake an accident? Placing the body at the bottom of the stairs was a natural decision—*that* would occur to anyone. But the shepherdess's crook through the chest was gratuitously grisly. I don't think most sib-

lings could bear to do such a thing. *You* could bear it, though. It would hardly seem real to you. You probably thought it was cool."

I was still shaking with fear, but Bolt's logic got through. Rose Martin spent most of her life staring at screens, punching buttons that made limbs slide off and heads explode. Naturally death and blood meant nothing to her. Sticking a stainless steel shepherdess's crook into her dead brother's body—nothing. Grinding up Valium tablets and slipping them into the flask of a brother who might shoot off his mouth and mess up her easy life—less than nothing. I'd found my murderer.

I forced down the nausea. "Is that how it happened, Rose?" I demanded, keeping an anxious eye on Olivia's gun. "Larry begged you and Olivia for help. And you were only too eager to make a murder look like an accident, weren't you?"

"And Miss Olivia was only too eager to wipe out the hard drive on Mr. Dan's computer," Bolt added, winking at me.

Damn. I'd forgotten the hard drive. Rose could've done that—she knew her way around a computer—but if she'd been all in a sweat to go impale her brother, maybe she'd left details like the home

computer to someone else. And Olivia was paranoid—Bolt said so, so I knew it was true—and hadn't she tried to stop us when we checked Dan's computer, saying it was an invasion of privacy to look for a suicide note? So *she* must've erased the hard drive, probably because she was afraid Dan had written something that could implicate Claude or Larry—or her. Maybe she'd messed up the room, too, searching for more evidence. Maybe she figured someone had launched a conspiracy against her, and Dan was part of it. So she'd wiped out the hard drive, and wiped her brother out, too. *Now* I'd found my murderer.

I looked at her. Her gun was firm in her hand, pointed at *my* head now. I gulped and decided to be brave. "You might as well tell the truth, Olivia," I said. "We all know what's going on. In cases like this, it's always apparent—"

"—always a parent who's ultimately responsible," Bolt chimed in. "Stop protecting her, Miss Olivia. For once, let your mother face the truth. She probably always suspected Mr. Claude caused your father's death—she's not stupid—and doubtless she saw how he was destroying her children's souls. But she took no action. She valued peace above integrity, and

consequently was a passive partner to evil. Perhaps that is the greatest sin—having the intelligence to recognize evil, but lacking the courage to oppose it. If we seek the root cause of this sorry business, it is your mother we must blame.”

Well, that about knocked me over, Mother. Trudy! Sweet, sad Trudy! The grieving widow! The devoted mother! I could hardly believe it—and yet, I saw how it made sense. She’s so *nice*—but niceness isn’t enough. You taught me that, back in third grade, when Mrs. Oliphant got sick. You have to be strong, too, or niceness becomes an excuse for laziness. And could Trudy have been that lazy—to grind up some of her Valium and mix it in her son’s flask, just to preserve the *status quo* that let her leave all the hard work to Claude, and let her children’s souls rot, while she busied herself with safe, irreproachable charity work? Yes. I hated to think it, but I’d found my murderer.

“Yes,” I said slowly, turning to face Trudy. “I’m sorry—it’s really crummy—but it’s a fact.”

And Bolt leapt forward—he isn’t the sort to be intimidated by Olivia’s gun—and grabbed the plate next to young Dan’s computer. “Yes!” he cried gleefully. “You’re right, lieutenant! It’s really crummy—*look* at all

these crumbs!—but crumbs are the only things left!” He grabbed the glass next to the plate and waved it aloft. “Here! Mrs. Unser said she brought young Dan a slice of pie and a glass of milk after he stalked away from the table, but he ate just one bite and drank just one sip before leaving for work. Here we have an empty, crummy plate and an empty, milky glass—who ate the pie, and who drank the milk? Was it someone so upset by the dinner conversation that he left the table before dessert was served? Was it someone who thus had ample opportunity to poison Mr. Dan’s flask while the rest of the family was still at the table? Was it the person who suggested that we look for a suicide note—perhaps because he himself had typed such a note onto Mr. Dan’s hard drive, never suspecting said hard drive would be wiped clean by his over-suspicious sister long after he’d gone to bed? Well, Mr. Gilbert? Do you deny the lieutenant’s theory is correct?”

And Gilbert cried—not just sobbing, like he had before, but all-out weeping. It’s embarrassing to watch someone that big weep, Mother. You can’t imagine all the parts that quivered.

“It’s true!” he sobbed, hud-



dling against his mother's shoulder, nearly knocking her over. "I put Valium in Dan's flask. I *had* to. We were so *happy* while Dan was away—Claude took such good care of us, and we all got along so *well*. Then Dan came home, and he was so *gloomy*, and last night he said dumb stuff and made Mother cry, and I couldn't *stand* it. I just wanted us all to be happy again, and love each other and be *nice* to each other, like before. I *couldn't* let Dan *ruin* it all."

"Of course not, baby!" Trudy cried, hugging him. Claude and Rose clustered around him, too, and Olivia dropped her gun as she ran to join the hug. Compassionately, Bolt released Larry from the handcuffs so he could join the family. We gave them a few moments to sob and pat, and then I turned soberly to Bolt.

"Better read Gilbert his rights, sergeant," I said.

"Yes, sir," he said, and shook his head. "I'd rather be arresting Mr. Unser, though. It's sad—when a man corrupts a nation, we recognize him as a tyrant, and we at least realize we *ought* to stop him, even if we lack the courage to actually do so. But when a man does his evil on a smaller scale, when he's content with corrupting only half a dozen or so souls, we

shrug and let it pass. And Mrs. Unser! I'm sure she considers herself a loving mother, because she hugs her children and indulges their every wish. But she's failed in her first duty to them, because she's never loved them enough to be hard on them when that's what they need. It would be too much trouble, and she hates trouble—she'd rather just be nice. And I doubt that, even now, anything will change. They'll hire lawyers for Gilbert and try to get him acquitted; perhaps they'll succeed. And the rest of them will go on living in this peaceful, loving, evil house, as if poor young Mr. Dan had never existed—or poor old Mr. Daniel, either." He sighed. "Well, sir! We've done what we can—and it isn't much. Sometimes, it just isn't much."

Well, that's about the end of the story, Mother. We couldn't fit the handcuffs on Gilbert but it was okay, he wasn't resisting. By the time we got him to the station, Claude had a squad of lawyers waiting, shouting objections about police brutality and irregular procedures. I let the captain deal with them, typed up a quick report, and went home to Ellen.

She was yelling at Kevin. His Sunday school teacher had caught him using a crib sheet on a Bible quiz. He said it was

just a study sheet, he'd just absentmindedly shoved it up his sleeve because he was in a hurry when he left the house, it had just accidentally slipped down during the quiz, he'd never actually looked at it. I listened carefully to his side of the story, thought about Trudy and her children, and told Kevin he was out of Little League for the rest of the summer.

So that's it. As always, I tried to tell the captain and everyone else that Bolt deserves the credit for solving the case; as always, people slapped me on the back, told me not to be so modest, and wouldn't take me seriously. Again I'm stuck with glory I don't deserve. For some reason, I feel even guiltier about it than usual. Anyway, Ellen sends her love. I'm sure Kevin would, too, if he were speaking to either of us. The house isn't exactly jolly these days, and I'm having lots of doubts about the way we're handling things. If you have any words of reassurance, it'd sure be nice of you to send them to

Your loving son,  
Walt

\*

Dear Walt,

As to words of reassurance, I have three—keep it up. Being a parent is always hard, if you're doing it right. If it's easy, you're doing it wrong. I see you understand that now—though you obviously *didn't* understand it when you were twelve and stole a pack of gum from the drug-store, and I wouldn't let you play in the basketball finals. I must say, much as I sympathize with your problems with Kevin, it's rather nice to see the tables turned. You didn't speak to me for a month—but you didn't ever steal anything again, either, did you?

Give Ellen my love—and Kevin, too, if he'll listen. As to Mr. Bolt, just give him my regards. I'll save any other messages I might have for the next time I write to him myself. I know you'd like me to tell you more about my friendship with him, but for now I'll just let you wonder. Maybe it's healthy for you to realize you don't know quite everything there is to know about

Your loving  
Mother

# UNSOLVED

by  
*Robert Kesling*

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the October issue.*

Out of tense and troubled times and political upheaval, new African nations emerged. Five gentlemen entering the Customs clearance in Nairobi were not casual tourists. All of them were mercenaries hired by newly created governments. They were professionals.

The dangerous five (including Georg) were known by their code names of Ax, Blade, Cutlass, Dagger, and Edge, and were traveling under false covers (one was posing as an engineer). They were in the employ of the upstart countries of Quandu, Rudani, Subeta, Tabona, Uxland, and Varchu. *Wait!* How, you ask, can only five agents have been serving six countries? Simple—one was a double agent, collecting a handsome fee from two sources.

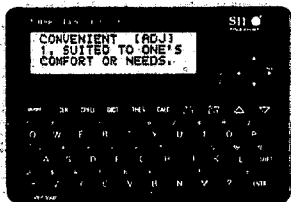
The six countries had organized into two blocs. Three were in the Allied Defense Group (ADG), and the other three were in the Cooperative Economic Alliance (CEA). Each nation sought advantages for itself and for its bloc from the older, well-established nations. Hence, the presence of the mercenaries just entering Nairobi Customs.

- (1) The ADG was represented by Karl, Mr. Nero, and the man known as Edge. Varchu did not join this bloc.
- (2) The CEA was represented by the man known as Dagger, the agent passing as a banker, and the one employed by Tabona. Mr. Otis was not a member of this bloc.
- (3) Ax, Blade, and Cutlass were (not necessarily in order) John, Mr. Mann, and the agent from Quandu, one of whom was the double agent.
- (4) The men posing as the artist, banker, and chef were Isaac, the agent from Rudani, and Ax.
- (5) As they lined up in single file to clear Customs, Blade was just behind Henry and just ahead of the man hired by Subeta. None of them had assumed the role of chef, and none came from Quandu. The chef and the Quandu agent were each loyal to his

- employer, but one was in the ADG and the other in the CEA.
- (6) The mercenary hired by Rudani stood patiently just behind Mr. Lusk and just ahead of the engineer (who was not from Varchu). Those three did not include the double agent.
  - (7) The man hired by Uxland stood immediately behind the dentist and just ahead of Mr. Park.
  - (8) Suddenly, the man between two ADG agents staggered and collapsed. He had been stabbed, a long-handled knife protruding from his back. His dying words were: "... man behind me ... he did it ... to me ..." The double agent rushed forward to help intercept the killer.

*Who stabbed whom? And what emerging countries hired them?*

# MAIL ORDER MALL



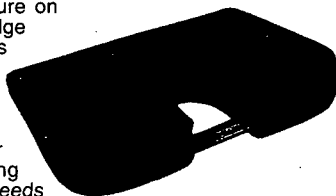
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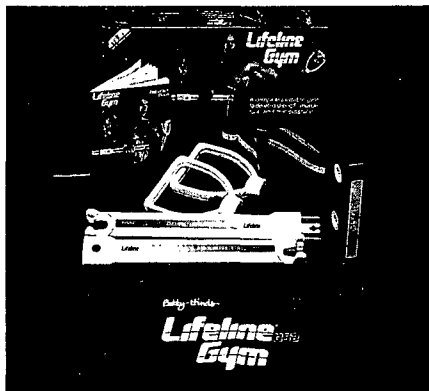
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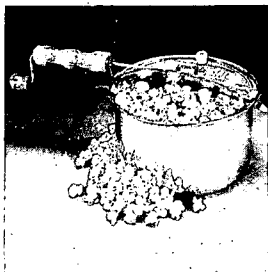
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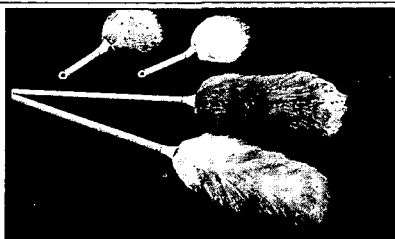


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FICTION

# PLAYING IT BY EAR

William Beechcroft

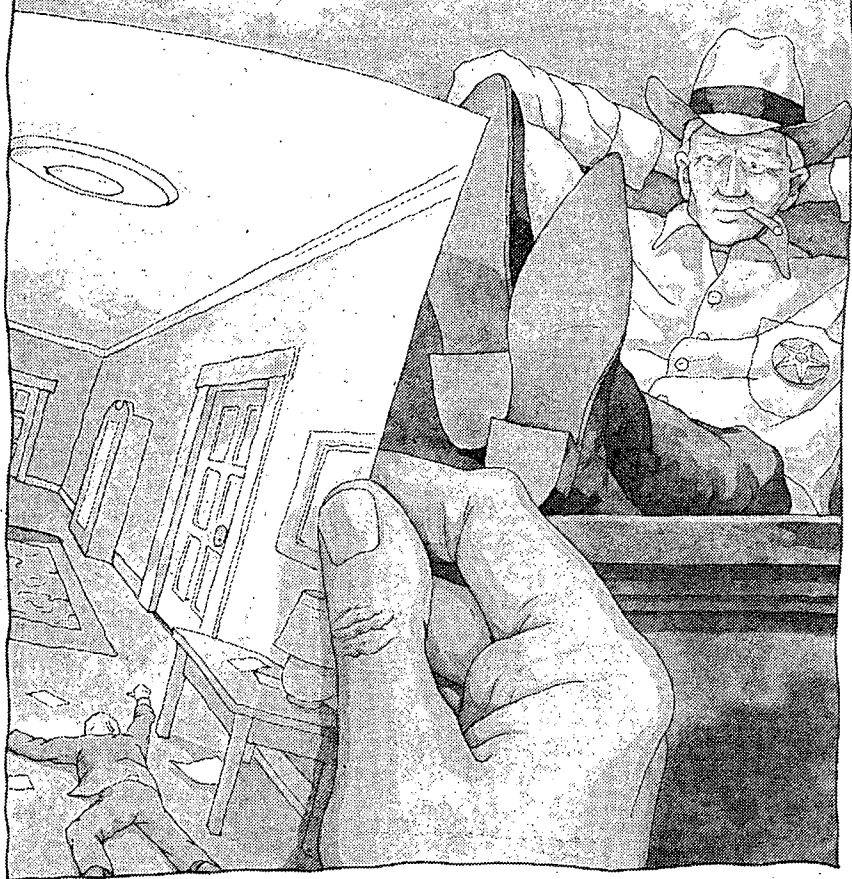


Illustration by Jim Adams

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The tall sheriff took a closer look at me. "Who'd you say you are?"

"Rod Montgomery," I told him a second time, waiting for recognition to break across that long, angular face of his. "You were my D.I. at Parris Island. We called you Horseface."

"Hell, everybody in the corps called me that." The sheriff thumbed up the brim of his Stetson. "Wait a minute, wait . . . a . . . minute. You said Rod? Would that be *Elrod*?"

I never did like my first name, particularly when people like —well, like Horseface MacAllen here—put a sarcastic little twist on it.

"I'll forget the 'Horseface,' MacAllen, you forget the 'El.'"

He hitched up his gun belt and smirked. "Out here in the Wyoming boondocks, *Elrod*, I'm 'Mac.'"

He leaned his narrow butt against his desk and folded his arms. Sunbaked and grizzled, he looked as hard as the Bridger Mountains I could see through the window behind him.

He pulled a gnarled cheroot out of the breast pocket of his fringed shirt, bit off an end, and lit the thing. "So where'd you end up after I finished with you? Nam, no doubt."

"Never got there. My tour was in Moscow."

"Moscow? Moscow, U.S.S.R.? I don't recall the U.S. Gyrynes making an assault on Commieland."

I nodded at the pair of hard-looking chairs on this side of his sparsely furnished office. "Mind if I take a load off my feet?"

"Go ahead. I notice you've put on a layer of lard since Parris Island."

I sank onto a creaking bare wood chair.

"And you're wearing bifocals," he went on, "and what's that stuck in your ear, a hearing aid?"

"Yeah, now I got four eyes and three ears."

"Me," MacAllen said with that unpleasant little smirk, "I'm still the same weight I was back then. Eyes like an eagle, and I can hear a cockroach cough." The little mocking grin stayed in place. "So what were you doing in Moscow?"

"Guarding the U.S. Embassy."

Mac MacAllen threw back his head and guffawed. "You telling me I knocked myself out trying to make a Marine out of you, and you missed the whole damn war playing doorman? My Gawd! So what are you doing now?"

"I've got a small detective agency back in Pennsylvania."

MacAllen broke up again. "Jeez, Elrod, back then you couldn't find your own butt with both hands and a compass. Shows to go you, you never know." He shook his head, still grinning. "So what brings you way out here to Medicine Ball, Wyoming?"

"Vacation. I was in the neighborhood, I'd heard you were sheriff here, so—"

"So you came by to tell the old sarge that his tough training saved your life standing guard there in Ruskieland?"

I let that pass. "So how're you doing out here in the land of posses and purple sage? Catch any rustlers lately?"

"Better'n that, Elrod. At the moment, I got me a murder to work on."

"A murder?"

MacAllen moved around behind his desk and sat in his swivel chair. "Yep. West end of town. Where the money is. Jake Gates, retired president of the local bank, got hisself shot dead day 'fore yesterday. Right in his own house. He was going through his mail, and somebody popped him and dropped him. One hit, with a .32."

"You got any suspects?"

"Got three. Old man Gates was loaded, so there's his only child, a daughter named Pearl Susan. Everybody calls her Pearly."

That was cute: Pearly Gates. "So why's she a suspect?"

"Usual reason." He jetted a puff of blue smoke ceilingward. "She loves money, he had a potful. Her ma died years ago, so she's the only heir."

"Who're your other two possibilities?"

MacAllen raised his pointed boots to the desk and leaned back in his swivel chair, cigar stuck in the side of his wide mouth, head cradled in interlocked fingers. "Not that all this means anything to you, Elrod, but what the hell? There's Sampson Davenport, just finished serving what was supposed to be a ten year rap for embezzlement. Got out in four. Damn crime, them early releases. Anyways, there was talk that he and Jake Gates was in occlusion—"

"Collusion."

"Cahoots. In cahoots on that embezzlement, and Jake's testimony put Sam Davenport behind bars for something they both done."

"Who's your third suspect?"

"Young drifter by the name of Mullins. Beard, tattoos. Come into town 'bout a week back on a Harley, no visible means of support,

and I caught him hanging around the Gates place like he was casing it."

"And that's all you got? Three motives?"

"No, Elrod, I did the scene-of-the-crime routine. Just because I'm out here in the Shoshone Basin forty-seven miles from nothing at all don't mean I don't get to a cops' convention now and again. Even did a paraffin test on all three suspects."

I decided not to tell him that the old inaccurate paraffin test for gunpowder residue had been replaced by the nitric acid test.

"Test showed nothing. 'Course whoever done the job no doubt wore gloves."

"So what other scientific research did you do?"

He gave me a long squint. "Don't mess with me, Elrod. You're in *my* office. I'll tell you what me and two of my deputies did. Among other things, we made a sketch of the scene." His boots clumped to the floor, and he yanked open the desk's center drawer. "Here."

He held out a sheet of three-ring notebook paper. I got up and walked the two paces to his desk, took it, and stepped back to my chair. It wasn't a bad scene-of-the-crime schematic of a hallway that led from the front door to the rear of the house. The entrance to the living room was partway along the hall, and a flight of stairs to the second floor started opposite the living room access. The body lay beside a hall table.

"We figure he was checking his mail when the perp come in—no-body locks their doors in these parts," MacAllen said. "When he went down, some of the mail fell on the floor beside him. That's them little squares Harry drew in there. Most of it was on the hall table. So what's any of this tell you?"

"Tells me he was killed after the mail was delivered."

My ex-D.I. smiled the kind of smile he used to give us when he was about to nail some poor bastard in the ranks for a speck of dust on his rifle.

"Very good, Elrod. But so what?"

"So what else you got—if anything?"

"Well, Elrod, like I told you, we're right up to date here in Medicine Ball. We vacuumed the scene."

"And?"

He reached back into the drawer, this time flipping a glassine envelope across the desk. I made the round trip again, sat and flattened the envelope on my palm. House dust, bits of red grit, a

shard of white paper that looked like the end of an envelope flap. And another piece of paper, a half inch long, eighth of an inch high bar with a quarter-inch circle on one side. It was bright orange. I turned the envelope over. The bar was yellow on the back. The circle was white.

"Nothing to go on there," Sheriff MacAllen said. "The red grit is from the brick walkway out front. That orange doodad was on the floor near the mail that had dropped beside the body. I figure it came off one of the mailing pieces, one of them sweepstakes where you're supposed to stick 'bonus stamp A' in space 'B' if you want a magazine subscription."

"You check the mail for that?"

"We had better things to do than go through the mail stack."

"'Course you did."

The crow's-feet at the corners of his eyes deepened. "What do you mean by that, Elrod? You trying to tell me my business? I suspect you ain't much more'n a creep P.I. spying on husbands and wives in other peoples' beds."

I let that pass. "You find out when that area was last vacuumed before you had at it?"

"Yep. The woman he had come in to clean twice a week had been there that morning. Name of Alvarez. She says she vacuumed the hall around ten, left the place an hour later. Gates was okay then, she says. Paid her and said he was going into town for lunch."

"Which he did?"

"Yep, 'cording to the owner of the Kactus Kate in town here. Told me Gates ate, left around two. Body was found at three thirty by his daughter, who said she'd come to visit. Doc Angst—he's the county coroner—put the time of death right about then."

"And that makes her your number one suspect, right?"

MacAllen nodded. "Has to be. Other two has pretty good alibis. At the time of the shooting, Sam Davenport was at the east end of town putting in a 'for sale' sign at a house out there."

"I thought he just got out of stir."

MacAllen took on the look of a teacher trying hard to get through to a dumb student. "That was a couple of years ago, Elrod. Now he's assistant manager for Medicine Ball Realty. The house was just listed by his company."

"He go out there alone?"

"Yeah, but one of their realtors drove by and saw him and his car in the driveway. Now the Mullins kid, the biker—"

"How old a man is Davenport?"

"In his sixties," MacAllen said. "Now, 'bout that biker—"

"How about describing Davenport?"

"Damn if you ain't got some kind of fixation on that man. Okay, he's maybe five ten, white hair, looks pretty beaten down, if you know what I mean. Who wouldn't after four years in the pokey? Clean-shaved . . . Oh, you and him got something in common. He's got three ears, too," MacAllen added with a derisive little tweak. "Now the girl, Pearly Sue—"

"Who saw Sam Davenport at that east end house?"

"Guy who works for the same realty company. Fella named Ed Fenley."

"Suppose we go talk with him."

Now MacAllen looked nicely confused. "With *Fenley*? Why would I want to do that, Elrod?"

"Let's just say a hunch."

"A *hunch*!"

"Tell you what, MacAllen. If it turns out to be nothing, I'll buy you a case of whatever you're drinking these days. If I'm right, you start calling me Rod."

The sheriff shrugged and stood. "What the hell, *Elrod*. The real estate office is just down the block."

We crowded into Ed Fenley's eight by eight office at the end of a corridor opposite the realty company's restroom. The dismal little cubicle was paneled in birch plywood, and the carpet on the floor showed wear. We had passed bigger offices all along the corridor. Obviously Fenley wasn't the company's big producer. This space looked like the last stop for a salesman on the way out.

"Sheriff?" Fenley said in a robust tone that belied his evident low-man-on-the-totem-pole status. "And—Who's your friend?"

MacAllen surprised the hell out of me when he said, "A consultant on the Jake Gates case." Then I figured he was setting me up for a fall that he was going to enjoy mightily. He confirmed it when he added, "Elrod here has a hunch."

Jeez, MacAllen, thanks a heap. I turned to the confused Mr. Fenley.

"It's more than a hunch," I said with confidence that I only half felt. "At the exact time you swore you spotted Sam Davenport and his car out at that house in the east end of town—" I leaned across

his desk in what I hoped was a threatening stance “—*you were seen elsewhere!*”

Fenley’s expression, a vague little half smile, didn’t change. But I was watching his watery blues. And when I said “elsewhere,” his pupils suddenly dilated. Better than a lie detector.

“Sheriff,” Fenley protested, “I don’t know who this guy thinks he—”

“Mr. Fenley,” I broke in, “do you realize what the punishment is for perjury in this state?” I hoped he did; I didn’t.

“Sheriff . . . Mac—”

“You’re in *big* trouble, Fenley,” I rolled on. “One chance to get out of it, and that chance is now. You can be an accessory to murder and end up in Wyoming State Penitentiary—” I supposed that was its name “—or you can be a friend of the court and keep doing business in your little place here.” Which wasn’t all that great, but it had to beat the state pen.

And Fenley cracked. “Off the record?” he managed with a parched voice.

“We aren’t newspaper reporters,” MacAllen pointed out. “But I’ll see what I can do.” He threw me a look that said, *You’re way out on a limb here, Elrod, but keep going.*

“You heard the sheriff,” I said.

Fenley looked as miserable as a failing realtor turned false witness could. Shoulders hunched, he showed us the top of his balding head and spoke earnestly to his desk blotter.

“I needed the money.”

MacAllen couldn’t hold back. “What money?”

“The five thousand Sam Davenport offered me to say I’d seen him over on Dull Knife Road at three thirty that afternoon.”

Back in MacAllen’s office, he still hadn’t lost that perplexed scowl he’d worn since we’d left Fenley.

“I’ll be damned if I can figure how you knew Fenley’d lied and Davenport was the shooter. How’d you do that?”

“Superior training, psychological insight, ESP, take your pick.”

“Don’t try to bamboozle me. Somewhere along the line you saw something I didn’t.”

“Dumb luck, sheriff.”

“Uh-huh.” He pulled a huge revolver out of his hip holster and checked its cylinder. “You want to come along while I pick up Davenport?”

I shook my head. "I've gotta get going." I stuck out my hand. "Good to see you again, sarge."

"Same here, Elr—Rod."

Two miles west of town, my hearing aid faded out. Like Sam Davenport's must have right around the time he'd shot Jake Gates.

I pulled over and took the packet of replacement batteries out of my shirt pocket. My third ear worked perfectly again after I pulled the little orange bar-and-ball activator tab off the new battery and replaced the dead one. I stuck the tab on the back of the battery pack. The shape he must have been in after killing Gates, Sam Davenport had lost track of his.

I would have told Horseface MacAllen all that if he hadn't persisted in being such an aggravating, unreformed hard-ass.

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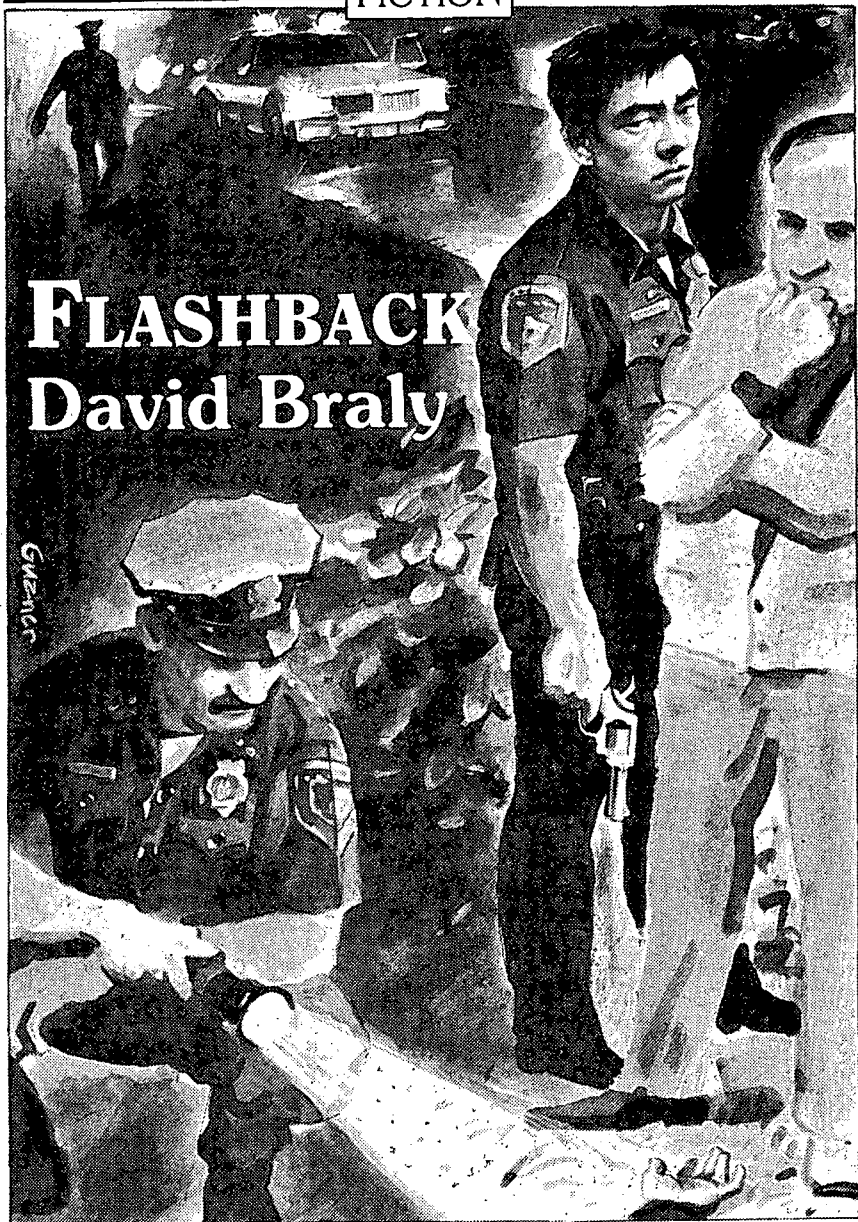


FICTION

# FLASHBACK

David Braly

Guzner



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Illustration by Vlad Guzner

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The boy ran up to him.

"Officer Kyo, what time is it?"

Jim Kyo looked at his wristwatch: nine fifty-five.

"It starts in five minutes," said Kyo.

"Thanks!" The boy turned and ran back to where four friends were waiting for him.

Kyo walked over to his patrol car. He waved to Frank Colburn, standing a hundred feet down the road by one of the firetrucks. If the experience of previous years was an indication of what would happen this year, the two firetrucks would be needed before the night was over. Every year that Kyo could remember the display had set the hillside ablaze. The firefighter waved back at Kyo.

Several hundred people were waiting near the hill. Most were children with their parents. Cars, pickup trucks, and minivans had been parked along both sides of the road. Kyo knew that a few thousand other people were waiting on their front porches or in their back yards. They wanted to see the display but didn't care enough to drive out to the edge of town for a close look.

Kyo leaned against the car and waited. He glanced at his wristwatch and saw that it was time for the display to begin. He hoped there wouldn't be a delay. Often there was. Last year there had been a half hour delay. The crowd always became restless when there was a delay, especially the children. He looked up toward the top of the hill. It was too dark to see the top. Even if it hadn't been night, he probably couldn't have seen the display organizers. Many junipers covered the hillside. The organizers were on top of the hill, out of sight from Kyo at the bottom.

Suddenly there was a *whish* sound, and then the sky above Kyo erupted into the multicolored sparkles of a giant expanding octopus while the explosion shook the ground. The crowd down the road responded with an unsymphonic "ahhh!"

After that, the rockets burst at a steady pace. Some were bigger than the first, some smaller; some had more colors, some had only one. Kyo enjoyed the display without being able to focus upon it. He was on duty. For the next half hour, that meant keeping one eye on the hillside for fires and the other on the crowd for overly venturesome children. At the end of the half hour, another officer would relieve him and he would replace that officer cruising the streets of town looking for people shooting off bottle rockets and other illegal fireworks. He preferred being here. Tracking down the source of bottle rockets was generally futile and always difficult.

Keeping watch below the hill was easy duty. That was why the officers traded off.

When a half hour had passed, Officer Andy Morrow arrived to trade duties with Kyo. Morrow told him that many complaints about bottle rockets were being called to the station. They had already caught eight children and two men. But rockets were still going up. Most reports were coming from the river area and the Gilbert Addition. Kyo got into his car and drove past the people and the parked vehicles along the road. Many people who recognized him waved or spoke a greeting through his open window. He decided to go to the Gilbert Addition unless the dispatcher gave him a specific assignment.

"Any available unit," the dispatcher's voice crackled over the radio, "investigate reports of gunshots in the area of Nolan and Elm streets."

Kyo lifted his microphone and pressed the speak button. "This is twenty-four," he said. "I'll check on the gunshots."

"Copy, twenty-four."

It took Kyo three minutes to reach the corner of Nolan and Elm streets. When he arrived, he saw no one. He pulled over to the curb, stopped, cut off his engine, and listened. Except for the booming of the fireworks display and the echoes, he heard nothing. He waited for a minute, listening, and then called the dispatcher.

"Did the R.P. give his address?" he asked her.

"Negative."

"Well, everything seems quiet now. I'll check around the neighborhood."

"Copy, twenty-four."

Kyo started the car. He pulled away from the curb and headed down Nolan Street. He drove slowly, with his window down, listening. He assumed that someone had fired a rifle into the air to celebrate Independence Day. Some people did it. It did no harm when the rifle had blanks. But some people used live ammunition. They forgot that what went up would later come down, and the bullet fired harmlessly (they thought) into the air might come down and kill someone.

He tried to recall who in the neighborhood might do something like that. Kyo knew almost everyone. Although he had been born and raised in Portland, he had lived here fourteen years. That was a long time for a cop to remain in one place. But he liked it here. So did his wife. There were some bad characters in the area, but

there were some bad characters in every area, and this small town had fewer troublemakers than most communities the same size. His problem at the moment was to recall whether anyone lived in this particular neighborhood who was reckless in that particular way. He could not think of anyone.

He decided to pull over to the curb again. He would cut off the engine and listen again.

But before he could, a woman ran across the street three hundred feet ahead. She was dressed in shorts and a shirt or blouse. She looked brunette, but Kyo could not be sure. She was only there for a moment, dashing across the street in the glow of the street lamps. But even at three hundred feet Kyo could see that she was not playing a game. She seemed frightened by something or someone. Kyo floored the accelerator.

When he arrived at the place where she had crossed, he pulled over and braked to a stop. He looked around. Beyond the light from the street lamps he saw only the black of night punctured by a few lighted windows. He shut off the engine, opened the door, and slid out of the car.

For a moment, all was silence.

Then a rocket exploded above the hill, its sparkles illuminating the western sky, its sharp burst followed by dull echoes.

Kyo looked around for the woman and the source of her fright. He saw no one, and nothing unusual. Windows in nearby houses were lit and produced within him the sensation that the neighborhood was calm. Yet he was sure of what he had seen.

He turned toward the car—

Gunshots exploded: three in rapid succession.

Kyo paused. He was not sure of the direction. They were close. Perhaps another three hundred feet. He was sure they came from a rifle.

Four more shots cracked. They were coming from his right. Probably the next block over.

Although still curious about the woman, he decided to go stop the celebrant using the rifle. He walked back to his car. He opened the door and started to get in.

A woman screamed, two gunshots cracked.

Kyo froze. The scream and the shots came from the right. They sounded as though they came from the same place. Before, he had not associated the woman he saw running and the gunshots he came to investigate. Now he did. Now he felt apprehensive because

now the thought came to him that the gunshots might not be for celebration.

He jumped into the car and was under way within seconds.

"Twenty-four to station."

"Station."

"I believe the shots are coming from the vicinity of Hayes and Hill streets. I have just heard gunshots following screams and a few moments ago saw a woman running." Kyo came to the intersection of Nolan and Hill and paused a moment while he turned onto Hill. "You'd better send backup. I don't know what I'm getting into."

"Copy, twenty-four. Any available unit, twenty-four needs immediate backup in the vicinity of Hayes and Hill. He reports hearing screams and gunshots."

Kyo reached the intersection of Hill and Hayes. He crossed Hayes and pulled over to the curb just beyond the intersection.

"Twenty-four," said the dispatcher, "twenty and twenty-seven will provide backup."

Kyo lifted the microphone and said, "Copy," and replaced the microphone. He threw open the door and got out. He drew his revolver. Twenty was the chief's number; he was pleased that Gallagher was coming.

A gunshot exploded—close.

Kyo's heart pounded. Panic tried to grip him, but he fought it off. The shot had come from his right, probably two or three houses down Hayes. He wanted to wait for backup but dared not. Somebody might be killing somebody.

He hurried around the patrol car without bothering to shut off the engine or close the door. A rocket exploded above the hill. But the light and the corner street lamp falling upon George Long's front lawn was all that illuminated the area ahead of him. He stepped over the curb and started walking across Long's yard. The grass beneath his boots sounded crisp and felt stiff. That told him that Long had not been watering it enough. Long came from Portland and had not yet learned that lawns on the sunny east side of the mountains needed to be watered more often than those on the rainy west side. Kyo reached the invisible boundary between Long's yard and Pete Mortimer's. Carefully, slowly, fearfully, he started across Mortimer's lawn.

"Officer!" The word had been urgently whispered by a male voice.

"Yes? Who's there?"

"Pete. Is that you, Jim?"

"Yes. Where are you?"

Kyo heard something rustle to his left and looked toward the hedge that divided Mortimer's front and back lawns. Mortimer came hurrying toward him. From the way Mortimer hesitated to pass the corner of the house and looked around him, Kyo knew that he was frightened.

"Jim, I've never been so glad to see a uniform in my life."

"What's going on?"

"I wish I knew."

"You must know something or you wouldn't be acting this way."

"Can we step back here out of the light?"

They went into the dark area between the Long and Mortimer houses. The hedge was at the rear. The light from the street lamp stopped a few feet away.

"What's going on?" demanded Kyo.

"I'm not sure. No, wait, listen. I mean it. I came home about five minutes ago from the Elks Club and parked my car by the curb like always. I locked it up and started for my front door. Suddenly someone shot at me."

"Are you sure it was at you?"

"Hell, yes. I felt the breeze from one round go right past my nose."

"What did you do?" asked Kyo.

"Ran. Around here, to put the corner of the house between me and the gun. Then I ran back to the hedge and went through it and lay on the ground and looked through the hedge to see if he was coming after me. I stayed down until I saw you."

"Did you get a look at the man?"

"No. I didn't try. I just ran. I'm not even sure it was a man. Maybe it was a kid or a woman."

"From which direction—"

Two gunshots cracked. Mortimer ducked down. Actually there was no danger. The house was between them and the shots. The shots came from the next yard over or even the yard beyond that.

"He's still there," whispered Mortimer. "I heard a woman scream after he fired at me and then more shots. I'm glad Elizabeth's helping out at a party tonight."

"Who lives next door on that side?"

"Tom and Rubie Field. They have a couple of small kids."

Kyo knew they did. He knew Tom Field, and his wife knew Rubie. Had Rubie been the woman who screamed? Or was the shooter



over beyond the Field house? He knew what the house next to the Fields looked like, but he did not know who lived in it. He asked Mortimer, and Mortimer told him it was a young couple named Rice.

Kyo heard a vehicle approaching on Hayes. He hoped it was the backup.

Two gunshots burst out.

The vehicle accelerated.

Kyo stepped to the corner of the house to see what was happening. A dark-colored Chevrolet raced past. The rear window had been struck, a hole in its center. Kyo looked in the direction from which the car had come and saw no one. The dark front lawn of the Field house looked empty, and beyond it, so too did the dark front lawn of the Rice house. Fireworks continued to explode above the distant hill.

Another vehicle was coming, this one on Hill. Kyo feared that the shooter would attack it. He tried to see into the darkness of the neighboring lawns. He could make out the silhouettes of trees and shrubs, but everything else was enveloped by shadows and night.

When the vehicle—the chief's patrol car—crossed the intersection, gunshots cracked. Kyo realized that the source was behind the shrubs in front of the Field house.

"This is the police!" he yelled. "Throw out your gun and step out with your hands up!"

A bullet tore into the wall only inches from Kyo's head. He ducked back, shaken. For a moment he stood against the wall, trembling, thinking how close the round had come.

"Jim?" whispered Mortimer. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Stay back."

"Count on it."

Gun ready, Kyo again peeked around the corner. At that moment, a man with a rifle dashed from the shrubs to the big elm tree that sheltered much of the Fields' front sidewalk. The man ran crouched over, the rifle held across his chest, to the cover of the tree trunk.

"Throw down your gun and surrender!" hollered Kyo.

The man did not respond.

Kyo wondered what he should do next. He had a revolver, and the man behind the elm had a rifle. The man would have the advantage in any one-to-one confrontation. Kyo would not attempt to



capture him singlehanded. Nor did he wish to shoot him. Probably the man was drunk or doped. The best thing to do, he decided, was wait for Chief Gallagher and other backup. He had heard Gallagher's car skid to a stop shortly after the man fired at it, so the chief should arrive any second. Probably he would circle round the rear of George Long's house on foot rather than strike out across the front lawn beneath the street lamp.

Another vehicle approached Hill.

Kyo gripped the gun and waited. When it crossed the intersection, Kyo would shoot toward the man. He might rattle him enough to spoil his aim. But the vehicle sounded as though it stopped just before it reached the intersection. It was probably another backup. Gallagher had probably radioed a warning. Kyo relaxed a little.

More fireworks exploded above the hill, and somewhere close a bottle rocket went off. The beam from a powerful searchlight set up at the new mall was streaking around and around through the black sky. Frogs were croaking in the distance. The air was warm and humid but not sweltering hot the way it had been in the afternoon. Kyo watched and listened while he waited for the chief to reach them.

"Did you see him?" asked Mortimer.

"For a second."

"Who was it?"

"I couldn't tell. I didn't get a good look at him. I only saw him for a second."

"I wonder who the woman was who screamed."

Kyo didn't respond. He wondered what was taking the chief so long.

Wood on the wall near his face suddenly burst to pieces simultaneously with the crack of a rifle shot. Kyo reeled back, his left cheek stinging. Splinters had struck it. He had only a second to think about it before he heard the man behind the tree scream, "Charge!"

Although badly slapped, Kyo forced himself to look around the corner. He gasped. The man was a few feet away, rushing wildly toward him with the rifle pointed forward.

"Freeze!" screamed Kyo, stepping back and leveling the revolver.

The man fired.

Kyo fired—and again—and again.

The man collapsed with his rifle onto the ground. Only by great willpower did Kyo stop himself from pulling the trigger a fourth,

fifth, and sixth time. He stood above the fallen man and tried to comprehend what had happened. Kyo could barely breathe. He was trembling uncontrollably. Blood drawn by the splinters warmed his left cheek.

The man on the ground groaned, and then said distinctly, "We'll take it yet, Jap."

Gallagher came running up from the hedge. Apparently he had gone round the rear of Long's yard into Mortimer's yard and then up to and past the hedge. Gallagher knelt beside the man, pushed away the rifle, and shone his flashlight on the man's face. It was a long face with a long nose and small eyes. The man's grey hair was clipped close. He appeared to be in his seventies.

"Harry Harper," said the chief.

Kyo's jaw dropped. He had known old Harry Harper ever since his arrival in town. Harper had lived here always.

"Harry," said the chief, "why did you do it?"

"Gotta . . ." said Harper, and stopped. After a moment he resumed: "Gotta take it."

"Gotta take what?"

"The island. Gotta take the damned island."

"What island?"

But the question came too late. Harper had stopped breathing.

Bob Martin, the other backup, came running across Long's front yard. People in the house across the street came out onto their front porch. Fireworks blasted streaks of color into the black sky above the hill and frogs croaked and a pickup truck lumbered slowly down Hayes.

"Harry lived a couple of blocks down the street," said Mortimer. He was standing beside Kyo now. "He's always been a nice, pleasant old man. Why on earth would old Harry go on a shooting spree?"

The chief told Martin to go to one of the patrol cars and radio the station to call Dr. Jensen and have him come out. Jensen was the county coroner.

Kyo felt guilty. He knew he shouldn't. He'd had no choice. But he had never before killed anyone. And this was old Harry Harper who had always waved to him and who had always manned one of the refreshment stands at the fairgrounds during rodeo week and who had always driven a tan Plymouth. He felt awfully guilty.

"Bob!" hollered Gallagher to Martin, who was halfway across the Long yard. Martin stopped and looked back. "Also tell her to send

us more officers. We're gonna have to check all the houses and yards around here for bodies."

Martin resumed hurrying toward the cars.

"Bodies?" said Kyo. "What bodies?"

"It isn't clear yet what happened," said the chief, "but I've got a hunch he flipped out. He may have killed everyone he met."

"But why?" demanded Mortimer. "He was as sane as I am."

"It's sane people who flip out."

"But—"

"Listen, he mentioned something about taking an island. Harry was in the South Pacific during the Second World War. We have fireworks and bottle rockets going off all over the place. And the searchlight. It's sort of like the echo of a battle. I ain't saying it right, but I can't explain it better than that. These celebrations sometimes remind me of Nam. I think he just lost it. I think he believed he was back in the Pacific. That sort of thing happens. It's damned rare, but it happens."

"Right after I shot him," recalled Kyo, "he said, 'We'll take it yet, Jap.' I thought he was talking to me personally. Harry never talked to me that way."

"He wasn't talking to you," said Gallagher. "He was talking to some Japanese soldier of fifty years ago who lived only in his head for a few seconds. What he said to you confirms it. In his own mind he was back on a Pacific island fighting the Big One."

"Poor Harry," said Kyo.

"It's kind of ironic," said Mortimer.

Kyo was thinking about Harry Harper. It was difficult for Kyo to recognize him because blood covered most of his face. He could not yet accept the fact that he had really killed him. He had always known he might have to kill someone someday. That was a risk of the job. He had assumed that if it happened it would be some felon violently resisting arrest. Maybe a kidnapper or dope dealer or robber. Never had he imagined it would be old Harry Harper.

"It's kind of ironic," said Mortimer again.

"Don't start that," said the chief.

"Don't start what?" said Mortimer.

"You know what."

"Listen, I don't mean anything."

"Just don't start it."

"Listen, Jim's a friend."

"What's ironic?" asked Kyo.

"Never mind."

"What's ironic?"

"Listen, all I meant was, it's kind of strange, you know. I mean, he thought he was back in the Pacific fighting the Japanese, and he gets killed by a Japanese person. That's all I meant."

"I told you not to start that."

"Listen, Jim asked me what was ironic, and it don't mean nothing. It's just strange."

"I told you not to start it, didn't I?"

Kyo turned and walked across the lawn into the lamplight and to the curb along Hayes. Why couldn't Harry Harper have fought in Europe? Nobody would have noticed if a German or an Italian had killed him even if he'd fought them in the war. Kyo was a fourth-generation American. But it didn't matter. An American soldier once again fighting the old enemy had been gunned down by Jim Kyo on the Fourth of July. Everyone would remember.

"Listen," said Mortimer, who stepped up behind him. "I just meant it was strange. I didn't mean anything by it, Jim."

"Go away."

"I mean, you asked what was ironic, and it is ironic, if you see what I mean."

"Go away, Pete."

"Listen, I didn't mean anything. Hey, you probably saved my life tonight."

"Good."

"Hey, I'm sorry. I just meant . . . Hey, thanks, okay?"

"Okay. Just leave me alone for a bit, huh?"

"Sure."

Kyo stood beneath the pole for several minutes. Two police cars arrived while he stood there, but he barely noticed them. He had never killed anyone before, and he thought about that. But mostly he thought about Mortimer's words. About what other people would soon repeat.

Far away someone began wailing loudly. Static-heavy talk grew heavy on the handheld radios. It was on the periphery of his thoughts.

"Jim."

Kyo turned in annoyance, until he saw it wasn't Mortimer.

"I know that shooting Harry's bothering you," said Gallagher, "but we need your help."

"Of course."

He went with the chief back to where Harry's body lay. Mortimer was not in sight. Officer Roy Douglas stood nearby, his radio held up to his chest, as though he were talking on it or listening closely.

"I want you and Roy to take the houses beyond Harper's. I've got Martin and Pincer taking those between here and his house on both sides of the street."

"Right." Kyo hurried over to Douglas. "How's it going?" he said by way of greeting.

"They just found some more," said Douglas. "A man and a woman. Both dead. That makes nine they've found in only three houses. The madman wiped out half the neighborhood."

For a moment Kyo didn't understand what Douglas was talking about. And then he remembered Gallagher's theory. Gallagher's apparently accurate deduction.

As he stood there at the edge of the light a few feet from old Harry Harper's cooling body, it took a few more moments for the implications to become apparent. But it did take Kyo only a few moments to realize that Harper's killing those people turned everything around. No one would see him as the enemy now. No one would relate his killing Harry to the ancient war. He was safe!

"Did you know Tom and Rubie Field?" asked Douglas.

"Did I know them?" Kyo forgot what he had been thinking about and swore obscenely. "What about their kids? Did the old bastard also murder those kids?"

FICTION

# THE STEALER

Sam Pizzo



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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Frankie parked in the shadow of the dumpster, his vehicle facing the street for a quick getaway. Pulling a nylon stocking over his head, he pushed through the door of the convenience store, gun in hand.

There were no customers, only the clerk. Frankie snaked his way to aisle three, choosing a spiral notepad and a No. 2 pencil. He paid for them. One dollar twenty-nine cents plus tax.

Placing his gun on the counter, Frankie tore a page from the spiral notepad and slapped it on the counter. He hunched over the sheet of paper and started to wri . . .

"You need to sharpen it," said the girl behind the counter.

Frankie could see that. He had eyes.

"I've got eyes, too," said the girl, "and I can see you don't have a sharpener."

Frankie retreated to aisle three and picked out a small pencil sharpener shaped like a rocket with a clear plastic nosecone for collecting the shavings. He paid for it. Seventy-nine cents plus tax.

Frankie sharpened the pencil, touched the point to his tongue, and hunched over the paper again. His pencil described tight circles, hovering just above the sheet of paper.

Getting started was the hard part. Dear Clerk? Dear Store Person? Dear Ms.?

"How about 'To Whom It May Concern,'" said the girl.

Frankie liked that.

"I'll write," said the girl, taking the pencil and paper from Frankie. "You dictate."

Frankie had never dictated before.

"It's easy," she said. "Just tell me what you want to say."

Frankie picked up his gun from the counter and paced the floor, one hand behind his back. He wanted her to write that he was not from this neighborhood. He was from east of here, and he just flew in tonight. And she should write that he did not live at home with his mama and anybody said he did was a liar. He wanted all the money in the store, and he wouldn't hurt her if she cooperated. He hoped he hadn't scared her too much. Yours Truly.

"You don't scare me," she said. "You don't even have a gun."

Frankie figured she must be blind. His gun was right there in his hand. Right under her nose.

"I wondered what that was," she said. "It looks like it was carved out of a bar of soap. It says I . . . V . . . O . . ."

She was smarter than Frankie thought.



"...R...Y. You should have painted it."

Frankie wanted advice he'd ask for it.

"And look at your hand," she said. "It's all sweaty with little soap bubbles on it."

Frankie didn't like all this talking. He thought he could run in, grab the money, and leave. He felt jumpy, and he couldn't think straight. Nothing was going the way he'd planned. His head was spinning, and he had a burning in his ...

"Antacids in aisle two," she said.

Frankie selected a roll of Tums from aisle two and a Dr. Pepper from the cooler. One dollar forty-nine cents plus tax.

"You look familiar," said the girl. "You live here in this neighborhood?"

Like Frankie said in his dictation, he was from east of here, way east of here.

"If you're from way east of here," she said, "you must live in the Atlantic Ocean."

Frankie looked at his right hand, mouthing the word east, then at the left, mouthing the word west. He had learned north and south in the fourth grade, but he was sick the day they taught east and west. What he meant to say was west. That's where he was from, far west of here.

"From Vegas, maybe?"

That's right. Frankie was a big shot from Vegas.

"If you're such a big shot," she said, "how come you ride a bicycle?"

How did she know Frankie rode a bicycle?

"I saw you pedaling back and forth for over an hour," she said, "and I saw you park your bike behind the dumpster."

So Frankie rode a bicycle. So what?

"I don't care what you ride," she said. "But what bothers me is you look familiar, and I know I've seen that bicycle before—the big balloon tires, the ratty old foptails on the handlebars, and the playing cards in the spokes to make it sound like a motorcycle."

Baseball cards, they were baseball cards, not playing cards.

"Okay, okay, baseball cards," she said, "but the point is I've seen that bicycle before. A boy I used to know rode a bicycle just like that, and he had a bushy eyebrow just like yours. I can see it through the nylon stocking, the way it goes all the way across with no stops."

Frankie didn't want to talk any more.

"Well, I do," she said. "I lived in this neighborhood when I was a kid. Papa was transferred, and we moved to Jersey.

Six months ago Papa ran off with a go-go dancer, and Mama wanted to move back to the old neighborhood, so here we are."

Frankie wanted to talk about something else.

"What I'm saying is that I know that bicycle, I know that eyebrow, and I know you."

The weather had been cold and damp.

"Don't change the subject," she said. "You are Frankie, Frankie Poletti, that's who."

Frankie had never seen her before.

"Sure you have," she said. "When we were kids, you used to play stickball in front of my house with my brother Joey. And you and Joey would carve guns out of soap and play cops and robbers."

Frankie had a dim recollection of a skinny girl with teeth and hair.

"That's me, Josephina."

She had plumped up nicely.

"And you're still skinny, but cute as ever." Josephina shook her hand as if to cool it. "Ooh, Frankie, I had such a crush on you I beat you up every day, sometimes twice."

Frankie jumped into the karate stance he had learned from the Ninja Turtles.

"Every time I had a crush on a boy," continued Josephina, "I'd beat him up. But when I found out *why* boys were differ-

ent, I didn't have to beat them up any more." Josephina teased a lock of her hair with an index finger. "Frankie, you ever . . . you know?"

Frankie didn't think he had, but he thought he might when he got to South America.

"When are you going to South America?"

As soon as Frankie robbed the store.

"There's not enough money in the store for you to go anywhere," said Josephina.

Frankie had seen a lot of people go in and out in the last two hours. They spent lots of money. Frankie was watching. She was lying.

"I'm not lying, Frankie," said Josephina. "I keep just enough money to make change. The rest I put in that little hole. It's a safe."

Josephina could open it.

"I can't," she said. "Only the manager has the key. I've got about twenty dollars and some change in the drawer, that's all."

Frankie would take that.

"You can't go to South America on twenty dollars," said Josephina.

Frankie had other money.

"What money?"

Frankie had savings.

"You've got five dollars in your savings," she said.

Who told her that?

"Your mama told me," said Josephina. "You bought a new tank for your tropical fish and spent all your savings, except for five dollars to keep the account open."

Josephina knew Frankie's mama?

"Sure," said Josephina. "She comes in here every night when she gets off swing shift. She buys a *Racing Form* and a beer, and she goes home to cook your dinner. She talks about you all the time, Frankie, what a fine boy you are and what a good husband you'll make for some lucky girl."

Frankie didn't know that.

"If you go to jail, it's going to break her heart. She loves you, Frankie."

If she loved Frankie so much, how come she yelled all the time? Clean your room! Pick up your underwear! Turn off the TV! Get your feet off the couch! And yesterday she said, Get a job or your butt is out! His own mother said that. So now he had a job, he's a stealer.

"You could do other work."

Frankie had a job, thank you.

"You could go to work for my uncle," said Josephina. "I could put in a word."

Frankie's head was made up.

"Talk to your mama," said Josephina. "It's eleven fifteen. She'll be here in a few minutes. After you talk to her, if you still

want the money I'll give it to you, even what's in my purse."

Frankie knew what Josephina was thinking. She thought Frankie was afraid of his mama. Ha! Frankie would show Josephina he was not a little mama's boy. He would tell his mama off good. Josephina would see.

A city bus squealed to a stop in front of the convenience store. Frankie swallowed twice as he watched his mama cross the parking lot. She was wearing the T-shirt and baseball cap he had given her for her birthday.

Frankie met his mama at the door of the convenience store shouting that he wasn't afraid of her any more and he was going to rob the store and he was going to South America where people wouldn't yell at him all the time and it wasn't his fault he had turned bad and she'd be sorry when he was gone because she'd have to take the garbage out and she'd have to change the light bulbs herself because he wouldn't be there to hold the ladder and when his picture was on the front page of the newspapers, the neighbors would know she was a bad mama. Frankie folded his arms across his chest. And that was that!

Frankie's mama walked past him to the newsstand. She

picked up a *Racing Form*, then a beer from the cooler.

"Hello, Josephina," said Frankie's mama. "Heard anything from your papa?"

"No, ma'am," said Josephina.

"Your mama still got the high blood?" asked Frankie's mama.

"Yes, ma'am," said Josephina.

"Tell your mama I got a hot tip for her in the third race," said Frankie's mama. "Tell her she should bet two on STUPID SON!"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And who's that guy standing there with my taupe stocking on his face?" Frankie's mama breathed an endless sigh. "Is that my Frankie?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I thought he looked familiar, but he sounds like a crazy man, like he's been smokin' dope or something. You all right, Frankie?"

Frankie was fine, thank you.

"You won't be so fine after I wash your mouth out with that gun," said Frankie's mama.

Frankie hated the taste of soap. He slipped the gun in his pocket.

"What's this I hear about you going to South America?"

She was the one who told him he had to get a job, so now he had one. And he was going to South America and she would never see him again and that

was fine by him and she could say one hundred, two hundred novenas, but she couldn't stop him.

"I'm not going to stop you," said Frankie's mama.

Oh oh! It was not like her to give up without a fight.

"But..."

Here it comes.

"...I'm worried about all them little plants and animals in your room."

She never worried about them before.

"I wonder..." Frankie's mama drummed her fingers on the counter and stared at the ceiling, then the floor, out the window, and at the ceiling again. "I wonder who's going to take care of them when you go."

Frankie figured she would take care of them until he got settled in South America. He would send for them.

"I'll take care of them, all right," said Frankie's mama. "You know that fuzzy little thing in the cage?"

That was Henry, Frankie's hamster.

"I always liked that little thing," said Frankie's mama.

She was lying. She hated Henry.

"I don't hate him," she said. "I just wished that Henry was a girl. So when you go to South America, I take my butcher

knife and . . . ssst! . . . Henrietta."

She wouldn't.

"I would," said Frankie's mama. "And them little plants under the blue light . . ."

Frankie's African violets. He held his breath.

" . . . weed killer."

She couldn't.

"I could," said Frankie's mama. "And them colored fishes in the new tank you bought . . ."

Frankie's head was pounding. He had a fever.

" . . . down the toilet."

They weren't just fish. They were friends. They had names.

"Maybe your friends can swim to South America," said Frankie's mama. "I'll tell them to swim all the way down the river to the ocean, then turn right."

It was over. Frankie knew it. His mama knew it. Frankie dragged the nylon stocking off his face and handed it to his mama.

"That's a smart boy," said Frankie's mama. She rummaged in her purse. "Here's a few bucks. Take Josephina out for a pizza when she gets off work. Take her to that place with the drippy candles in the bottles." She dragged Frankie aside and whispered in his ear. Frankie hated it when she whispered because she whis-

pered too loud. It was almost as if she wanted people to hear her secrets. "I KNOW YOU'VE BEEN LOOKING FOR A NICE GIRL TO SETTLE DOWN WITH—YOU KNOW, GET MARRIED AND RAISE A FAMILY. YOU'RE A NICE BOY. JOSEPHINA IS A NICE GIRL. AND SHE'S GOT BIG HIPS FOR LOTS OF BABIES. IF YOU DON'T HURRY UP AND GRAB HER QUICK, SOMEBODY ELSE WILL."

Bringing her foot down hard on Frankie's instep for emphasis, she tucked the *Racing Form* and the beer under her arm and left the store mumbling over her rosary.

"It wasn't nice you yelled at your mama like that," said Josephina, "but it was good you stood up to her."

Frankie had spoken his mind, hadn't he? He felt good about that. It was the first time he ever told his mama what he thought.

"You're not a mama's boy any more," said Josephina. "You're a man."

Frankie hitched up his pants and strode to the cold cereal and back. Damn right!

"And a man," said Josephina, "should be thinking, like your mama said, about settling down."

Interesting she should mention that. Frankie was thinking

the same thing. He was looking forward to . . . you know.

"Just think, Frankie," said Josephina, "if we got married right away, we could move in with my mama."

Frankie would prefer that she move in with him and his . . .

"I'm sure my uncle would give you a job in his fish market," said Josephina. "He needs somebody to clean the fish and take out the guts."

Guts! Frankie hated . . .

"And there's a nice place in

the back yard where you can keep your hamster."

Henry? Outside? Over Frankie's dead . . .

"And the fish tank can go on the shelf in the garage. I don't want my cat to drown . . ."

Frankie stomped over to aisle three. He snatched up a packet of taupe panty hose and paid for it. Four dollars and twenty-nine cents plus tax. Pulling the panty hose over his head, he yanked a page from the spiral notepad and slammed it on the counter.

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MYSTERY CLASSIC

# THE BLUE LENSES

Daphne  
Du Maurier



Illustration by Mark Penta

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This was the day for the bandages to be removed and the blue lenses fitted. Marda West put her hand up to her eyes and felt the crepe binder and the layer upon layer of cotton wool beneath. Patience would be rewarded at last. The days had passed into weeks since her operation, and she had lain there suffering no physical discomfort, but only the anonymity of darkness, a negative feeling that the world and the life around were passing her by. During the first few days there had been pain, mercifully allayed by drugs, and then the sharpness of this wore down, dissolved, and she was left with a sense of great fatigue, which they assured her was reaction after shock. As for the operation itself, it had been successful. Here was definite promise. A hundred percent successful.

"You will see," the surgeon told her, "more clearly than ever before."

"But how can you tell?" she urged, desiring her slender thread of faith to be reinforced.

"Because we examined your eyes when you were under the anesthetic," he replied, "and again since, when we put you under for a second time. We would not lie to you, Mrs. West."

This reassurance came from them two or three times a day, and she had to steel herself to patience as the weeks wore by, so that she referred to the matter perhaps only once every twenty-four hours, and then by way of a trap, to catch them unawares. "Don't throw the roses out. I should like to see them," she would say, and the day nurse would be surprised into the admission, "They'll be over before you can do that." Which meant that she would not see this week.

Actual dates were never mentioned. Nobody said, "On the fourteenth of the month you will have your eyes." And the subterfuge continued, the pretense that she did not mind and was content to wait. Even Jim, her husband, was now classed in the category of "them," the staff of the hospital, and no longer treated as a confidant.

Once, long ago, every qualm and apprehension had been admitted and shared. This was before the operation. Then, fearful of pain and blindness, she had clung to him and said, "What if I never see again, what will happen to me?" picturing herself as helpless and maimed. And Jim, whose anxiety was no less harsh than hers, would answer, "Whatever comes, we'll go through it together."

*From THE BREAKING POINT by Daphne Du Maurier, copyright © 1959 by Daphne Du Maurier, published by arrangement with Doubleday.*

Now, for no known reason except that darkness, perhaps, had made her more sensitive, she was shy to discuss her eyes with him. The touch of his hand was the same as it had ever been, and his kiss, and the warmth of his voice; but always, during these days of waiting, she had the seed of fear that he, like the staff at the hospital, was being too kind. The kindness of those who knew towards the one who must not be told. Therefore, when at last it happened, when at his evening visit the surgeon said, "Your lenses will be fitted tomorrow," surprise was greater than joy. She could not say anything, and he had left the room before she could thank him. It was really true. The long agony had ended. She permitted herself only a last feeler, before the day nurse went off duty—"They'll take some getting used to, and hurt a bit at first?"—her statement of fact put as a careless question. But the voice of the woman who had tended her through so many weary days replied, "You won't know you've got them, Mrs. West."

Such a calm, comfortable voice, and the way she shifted the pillows and held the glass to the patient's lips, the hand smelling faintly of the Morny French Fern soap with which she washed her, these things gave confidence and implied that she could not lie.

"Tomorrow I shall see you," said Marda West, and the nurse, with the cheerful laugh that could be heard sometimes down the corridor outside, answered, "Yes, I'll give you your first shock."

It was a strange thought how memories of coming into the nursing home were now blunted. The staff who had received her were dim shadows, the room assigned to her, where she still lay, like a wooden box built only to entrap. Even the surgeon, brisk and efficient during those two rapid consultations when he had recommended an immediate operation, was a voice rather than a presence. He gave his orders and the orders were carried out, and it was difficult to reconcile this bird of passage with the person who, those several weeks ago, had asked her to surrender herself to him, who had in fact worked this miracle upon the membranes and the tissues which were her living eyes.

"Aren't you feeling excited?" This was the low, soft voice of her night nurse, who, more than the rest of them, understood what she had endured. Nurse Brand, by day, exuded a daytime brightness; she was a person of sunlight, of bearing in fresh flowers, of admitting visitors. The weather she described in the world outside appeared to be her own creation. "A real scorcher," she would say, flinging open windows, and her patient would sense the cool uni-

form, the starched cap, which somehow toned down the penetrating heat. Or else she might hear the steady fall of rain and feel the slight chill accompanying it. "This is going to please the gardeners, but it'll put paid to Matron's day on the river."

Meals, too, even the dullest of lunches, were made to appear delicacies through her method of introduction. "A morsel of brill *au beurre?*" she would suggest happily, whetting reluctant appetite, and the boiled fish that followed must be eaten, for all its tastelessness, because otherwise it would seem to let down Nurse Brand, who had recommended it. "Apple fritters—you can manage two, I'm sure," and the tongue began to roll the imaginary fritter, crisp as a flake and sugared, which in reality had a languid, leathery substance. And so her cheerful optimism brooked no discontent—it would be offensive to complain, lacking in backbone to admit, "Let me just lie. I don't want anything."

The night brought consolation and Nurse Ansel. She did not expect courage. At first, during pain, it had been Nurse Ansel who had administered the drugs. It was she who had smoothed the pillows and held the glass to the parched lips. Then, with the passing weeks, there had been the gentle voice and the quiet encouragement. "It will soon pass. This waiting is the worst." At night the patient had only to touch the bell, and in a moment Nurse Ansel was by the bed. "Can't sleep, I know, it's wretched for you. I'll give you just two and a half grains, and the night won't seem so long."

How compassionate that smooth and silken voice. The imagination, making fantasies through enforced rest and idleness, pictured some reality with Nurse Ansel that was not hospital—a holiday abroad, perhaps, for the three of them, and Jim playing golf with an unspecified male companion, leaving her, Marda, to wander with Nurse Ansel. All she did was faultless. She never annoyed. The small shared intimacies of nighttime brought a bond between nurse and patient that vanished with the day, and when she went off duty, at five minutes to eight in the morning, she would whisper, "Until this evening," the very whisper stimulating anticipation, as though eight o'clock that night would not be clocking in but an assignation.

Nurse Ansel understood complaint. When Marda West said wearily, "It's been such a long day," her answering "Has it?" implied that for her, too, the day had dragged, that in some hostel she had tried to sleep and failed, that now only did she hope to come alive.

It was with a special secret sympathy that she would announce the evening visitor. "Here is someone you want to see, a little earlier than usual," the tone suggesting that Jim was not the husband of ten years but a troubadour, a lover, someone whose bouquet of flowers had been plucked in an enchanted garden and now brought to a balcony. "What gorgeous lilies!" the exclamation half a breath and half a sigh, so that Marda West imagined exotic dragon-petalled beauties growing to heaven, and Nurse Ansel, a little priestess, kneeling. Then, shyly, the voice would murmur, "Good evening, Mr. West. Mrs. West is waiting for you." She would hear the gentle closing of the door, the tiptoeing out with the lilies, and the almost soundless return, the scent of the flowers filling the room.

It must have been during the fifth week that Marda West had tentatively suggested, first to Nurse Ansel and then to her husband, that perhaps when she returned home the night nurse might go with them for the first week. It would chime with Nurse Ansel's own holiday. Just a week. Just so that Marda West could settle to home again.

"Would you like me to?" Reserve lay in the voice, yet promise, too.

"I would. It's going to be so difficult at first." The patient, not knowing what she meant by difficult, saw herself as helpless still, in spite of the new lenses, and needing the protection and the reassurance that up to the present only Nurse Ansel had given her. "Jim, what about it?"

His comment was something between surprise and indulgence. Surprise that his wife considered a nurse a person in her own right, and indulgence because it was the whim of a sick woman. At least that was how it seemed to Marda West, and later, when the evening visit was over and he had gone home, she said to the night nurse, "I can't make out whether my husband thought it was a good idea or not."

The answer was quiet yet reassuring. "Don't worry. Mr. West is reconciled."

But reconciled to what? The change in routine? Three people round the table, conversation, the unusual status of a guest who, devoting herself to her hostess, must be paid? (Though the last would not be mentioned, but glossed over at the end of a week in an envelope.)

"Aren't you feeling excited?" Nurse Ansel, by the pillow, touched the bandages, and it was the warmth in the voice, the certainty

that only a few hours now would bring revelation, which stifled at last all lingering doubt of success. The operation had not failed. Tomorrow she would see once more.

"In a way," said Marda West, "it's like being born again. I've forgotten how the world looks."

"Such a wonderful world," murmured Nurse Ansel, "and you've been patient for so long."

The sympathetic hand expressed condemnation of all those who had insisted upon bandages through the waiting weeks. Greater indulgence might have been granted had Nurse Ansel herself been in command and waved a wand.

"It's queer," said Marda West, "tomorrow you won't be a voice to me any more. You'll be a person."

"Aren't I a person now?"

A note of gentle teasing, of pretended reproach, which was all part of the communication between them, so soothing to the patient. This must surely, when sight came back, be foregone.

"Yes, of course, but it's bound to be different."

"I don't see why."

Even knowing she was dark and small—for so Nurse Ansel had described herself—Marda West must be prepared for surprise at the first encounter, the tilt of the head, the slant of the eyes, or perhaps some unexpected facial form like too large a mouth, too many teeth.

"Look, feel . . ." and not for the first time Nurse Ansel took her patient's hand and passed it over her own face, a little embarrassing, perhaps, because it implied surrender, the patient's hand a captive. Marda West, withdrawing it, said with a laugh, "It doesn't tell me a thing."

"Sleep, then. Tomorrow will come too soon." There came the familiar routine of the bell put within reach, the last-minute drink, the pill, and then the soft, "Goodnight, Mrs. West. Ring if you want me."

"Thank you. Goodnight."

There was always a slight sense of loss, of loneliness, as the door closed and she went away, and a feeling of jealousy, too, because there were other patients who received these same mercies and who, in pain, would also ring their bells. When she awoke—and this often happened in the small hours—Marda West would no longer picture Jim at home, lovely on his pillow, but would have an image of Nurse Ansel, seated perhaps by someone's bed, bending to

give comfort, and this alone would make her reach for the bell, and press her thumb upon it, and say, when the door opened, "Were you having a nap?"

"I never sleep on duty."

She would be seated, then, in the cubbyhole midway along the passage, perhaps drinking tea or entering particulars of charts into a ledger. Or standing beside a patient, as she now stood beside Marda West.

"I can't find my handkerchief."

"Here it is. Under your pillow all the time."

A pat on the shoulder (and this in itself was a sort of delicacy), a few moments of talk to prolong companionship, and then she would be gone to answer other bells and other requests.

"Well, we can't complain of the weather!" Now it was the day itself, and Nurse Brand coming in like the first breeze of morning, a hand on a barometer set fair. "All ready for the great event?" she asked. "We must get a move on, and keep your prettiest nightie to greet your husband."

It was her operation in reverse. This time in the same room, though, and not a stretcher, but only the deft hands of the surgeon with Nurse Brand to help him. First came the disappearance of the crepe, the lifting of the bandages and lint, the very slight prick of an injection to dull feeling. Then he did something to her eyelids. There was no pain. Whatever he did was cold, like the slipping of ice where the bandages had been, yet soothing, too.

"Now, don't be disappointed," he said. "You won't know any difference for about half an hour. Everything will seem shadowed. Then it will gradually clear. I want you to lie quietly during that time."

"I understand. I won't move."

The longed-for moment must not be too sudden. This made sense. The dark lenses, fitted inside her lids, were temporary for the first few days. Then they would be removed and others fitted.

"How much shall I see?" The question dared at last.

"Everything. But not immediately in color. Just like wearing sunglasses on a bright day. Rather pleasant."

His cheerful laugh gave confidence, and when he and Nurse Brand had left the room she lay back again, waiting for the fog to clear and for the summer day to break in upon her vision, however subdued, however softened by the lenses.

Little by little the mist dissolved. The first object was angular, a wardrobe. Then a chair. Then, moving her head, the gradual forming of the window's shape, the vases on the sill, the flowers Jim had brought her. Sounds from the street outside merged with the shapes, and what had seemed sharp before was now in harmony. She thought to herself, I wonder if I can cry? I wonder if the lenses will keep back tears?, but feeling the blessing of sight restored, she felt the tears as well, nothing to be ashamed of—one or two, which were easily brushed away.

All was in focus now. Flowers, the washbasin, the glass with the thermometer in it, her dressing gown. Wonder and relief were so great that they excluded thought.

They weren't lying to me, she thought. It's happened. It's true.

The texture of the blanket covering her, so often felt, could now be seen as well. Color was not important. The dim light caused by the blue lenses enhanced the charm, the softness of all she saw. It seemed to her, rejoicing in form and shape, that color would never matter. There was time enough for color. The blue symmetry of vision itself was all-important. To see, to feel, to blend the two together. It was indeed rebirth, the discovery of a world long lost to her.

There seemed to be no hurry now. Gazing about the small room and dwelling upon every aspect of it was richness, something to savor. Hours could be spent just looking at the room and feeling it, traveling through the window and to the windows of the houses opposite.

Even a prisoner, she decided, could find comfort in his cell if he had been blinded first and had recovered his sight.

She heard Nurse Brand's voice outside, and turned her head to watch the opening door.

"Well . . . are we happy once more?"

Smiling, she saw the figure dressed in uniform coming into the room, bearing a tray, her glass of milk upon it. Yet, incongruous, absurd, the head with the uniformed cap was not a woman's head at all. The thing bearing down upon her was a cow . . . a cow on a woman's body. The frilled cap was perched upon wide horns. The eyes were large and gentle, but cow's eyes, the nostrils broad and humid, and the way she stood there, breathing, was the way a cow stood placidly in pasture, taking the day as it came, content, unmoved.

"Feeling a bit strange?"



The laugh was a woman's laugh, a nurse's laugh, Nurse Brand's laugh, and she put the tray down on the cupboard beside the bed. The patient said nothing. She shut her eyes, then opened them again. The cow in the nurse's uniform was with her still.

"Confess now," said Nurse Brand, "you wouldn't know you had the lenses in, except for the color."

It was important to gain time. The patient stretched out her hand carefully for the glass of milk. She sipped the milk slowly. The mask must be worn on purpose. Perhaps it was some kind of experiment connected with the fitting of the lenses—though how it was supposed to work she could not imagine. And it was surely taking rather a risk to spring such a surprise and, to people weaker than herself who might have undergone the same operation, downright cruel.

"I see very plainly," she said at last. "At least I think I do."

Nurse Brand stood watching her with folded arms. The broad uniformed figure was much as Marda West had imagined it, but that cow's head tilted, the ridiculous frill of the cap perched on the horns . . . where did the head join the body, if mask it in fact was?

"You don't sound too sure of yourself," said Nurse Brand. "Don't say you're disappointed, after all we've done for you."

The laugh was cheerful, as usual, but she should be chewing grass, the slow jaws moving from side to side.

"I'm sure of myself," answered her patient, "but I'm not so sure of you. Is it a trick?"

"Is what a trick?"

"The way you look . . . your . . . face?"

Vision was not so dimmed by the blue lenses that she could not distinguish a change of expression. The cow's jaw distinctly dropped.

"Really, Mrs. West!" This time the laugh was not so cordial. Surprise was very evident. "I'm as the good God made me. I dare say He might have made a better job of it."

The nurse, the cow, moved from the bedside towards the window and drew the curtains more sharply back, so that the full light filled the room. There was no visible join to the mask: the head blended to the body. Marda West saw how the cow, if she stood at bay, would lower her horns.

"I didn't mean to offend you," she said, "but it is just a little strange. You see . . ."

She was spared explanation because the door opened and the surgeon came into the room. At least, the surgeon's voice was recognizable as he called, "Hullo! How goes it?" and his figure in the dark coat and the sponge-bag trousers was all that an eminent surgeon's should be, but . . . that terrier's head, ears pricked, the inquisitive, searching glance? In a moment surely he would yap, and a tail wag swiftly?

This time the patient laughed. The effect was ludicrous. It must be a joke. It was, it had to be; but why go to such expense and trouble, and what in the end was gained by the deception? She checked her laugh abruptly as she saw the terrier turn to the cow, the two communicate with each other soundlessly. Then the cow shrugged its too ample shoulders.

"Mrs. West thinks us a bit of a joke," she said. But the nurse's voice was not overpleased.

"I'm all for that," said the surgeon. "It would never do if she took a dislike to us, would it?"

Then he came and put his hand out to his patient and bent close to observe her eyes. She lay very still. He wore no mask either. None, at least, that she could distinguish. The ears were pricked, the sharp nose questing. He was even marked, one ear black, the other white. She could picture him at the entrance to a fox's lair, sniffing, then quick on the scent scuffling down the tunnel, intent upon the job for which he was trained.

"Your name ought to be Jack Russell," she said aloud.

"I beg your pardon?"

He had straightened himself but still stood beside the bed, and the bright eyes had a penetrating quality, one ear cocked.

"I mean—" Marda West searched for words "—the name seems to suit you better than your own."

She felt confused. Mr. Edmund Greaves, with all the letters after him on the plate in Harley Street, what must he think of her?

"I know a James Russell," he said to her, "but he's an orthopedic surgeon and breaks your bones. Do you feel I've done that to you?"

His voice was brisk, but he sounded a little surprised, as Nurse Brand had done. The gratitude which was owed to their skill was not forthcoming.

"No, no indeed," said the patient hastily, "nothing is broken at all, I'm in no pain. I see clearly. Almost too clearly, in fact."

"That's as it should be," he said, and the laugh that followed resembled a short sharp bark.

"Well, nurse," he went on, "the patient can do everything within reason except remove the lenses. You've warned her, I suppose?"

"I was about to, sir, when you came in."

Mr. Greaves turned his pointed terrier nose to Marda West.

"I'll be in on Thursday," he said, "to change the lenses. In the meantime, it's just a question of washing out the eyes with a solution three times a day. They'll do it for you. Don't touch them yourself. And above all don't fiddle with the lenses. A patient did that once and lost his sight. He never recovered it."

"If you tried that," the terrier seemed to say, "you would get what you deserved. Better not make the attempt. My teeth are sharp."

"I understand," said the patient slowly. But her chance had gone. She could not now demand an explanation. Instinct warned her that he would not understand. The terrier was saying something to the cow, giving instructions. Such a sharp staccato sentence, and the foolish head nodded in answer. Surely on a hot day the flies would bother her—or would the frilled cap keep insects away?

As they moved to the door the patient made a last attempt.

"Will the permanent lenses," she asked, "be the same as these?"

"Exactly the same," yapped the surgeon, "except that they won't be tinted. You'll see the natural color. Until Thursday, then."

He was gone, and the nurse with him. She could hear the murmur of voices outside the door. What happened now? If it was really come kind of test, did they remove their masks instantly? It seemed to Marda West of immense importance that she should find this out. The trick was not truly fair: it was a misuse of confidence. She slipped out of bed and went to the door. She could hear the surgeon say, "One and a half grains. She's a little overwrought. It's the reaction, of course."

Bravely she flung open the door. They were standing there in the passage, wearing the masks still. They turned to look at her, and the sharp bright eyes of the terrier, the deep eyes of the cow both held reproach, as though the patient, by confronting them, had committed a breach of etiquette.

"Do you want anything, Mrs. West?" asked Nurse Brand.

Marda West stared beyond them down the corridor. The whole floor was in the deception. A maid, carrying dustpan and brush, coming from the room next door had a weasel's head upon her small body, and the nurse advancing from the other side was a little prancing kitten, her cap coquettish on her furry curls, the doctor beside her a proud lion. Even the porter, arriving at that

moment in the lift opposite, carried a boar's head between his shoulders. He lifted out luggage, uttering a boar's heavy grunt.

The first sharp prick of fear came to Marda West. How could they have known she would open the door at that minute? How could they have arranged to walk down the corridor wearing masks, the other nurses and the other doctor, and the maid appear out of the room next door, and the porter come up in the lift? Something of her fear must have shown in her face, for Nurse Brand, the cow, took hold of her and led her back into her room.

"Are you feeling all right, Mrs. West?" she asked anxiously.

Marda West climbed slowly into bed. If it was a conspiracy, what was it all for? Were the other patients to be deceived as well?

"I'm rather tired," she said. "I'd like to sleep."

"That's right," said Nurse Brand, "you got a wee bit excited."

She was mixing something in the medicine glass, and this time, as Marda West took the glass, her hand trembled. Could a cow see clearly how to mix medicine? Supposing she made a mistake?

"What are you giving me?" she asked.

"A sedative," answered the cow.

Buttercups and daisies. Lush green grass. Imagination was strong enough to taste all three in the mixture. The patient shuddered. She lay down on her pillow, and Nurse Brand drew the curtains close.

"Now just relax," she said, "and when you wake up you'll feel so much better." The heavy head stretched forward—in a moment it would surely open its jaws and moo.

The sedative acted swiftly. Already a drowsy sensation filled the patient's limbs.

Soon peaceful darkness came, but she awoke, not to the sanity she had hoped for, but to lunch brought in by the kitten. Nurse Brand was off duty.

"How long must it go on for?" asked Marda West. She had resigned herself to the trick. A dreamless sleep had restored energy and some measure of confidence. If it was somehow necessary to the recovery of her eyes, or even if they did it for some unfathomable reason of their own, it was their business.

"How do you mean, Mrs. West?" asked the kitten, smiling. Such a flighty little thing, with its pursed-up mouth, and even as it spoke it put a hand to its cap.

"This test on my eyes," said the patient, uncovering the boiled chicken on her plate. "I don't see the point of it. Making yourselves such guys. What is the object?"

The kitten, serious, if a kitten could be serious, continued to stare at her. "I'm sorry, Mrs. West," she said, "I don't follow you. Did you tell Nurse Brand you couldn't see properly yet?"

"It's not that I can't see," replied Marda West. "I see perfectly well. The chair is a chair. The table is a table. I'm about to eat boiled chicken. But why do you look like a kitten, and a tabby kitten at that?"

Perhaps she sounded ungracious. It was hard to keep her voice steady. The nurse—Marda West remembered the voice, it was Nurse Sweeting, and the name suited her—drew back from the trolley table.

"I'm sorry," she said, "if I don't come up to scratch. I've never been called a cat before."

Scratch was good. The claws were out already. She might purr to the lion in the corridor, but she was not going to purr to Marda West.

"I'm not making it up," said the patient. "I see what I see. You are a cat, if you like, and Nurse Brand's a cow."

This time the insult must sound deliberate. Nurse Sweeting had fine whiskers to her mouth. The whiskers bristled.

"If you please, Mrs. West," she said, "will you eat your chicken, and ring the bell when you are ready for the next course?"

She stalked from the room. If she had a tail, thought Marda West, it would not be wagging, like Mr. Greaves', but twitching angrily.

No, they could not be wearing masks. The kitten's surprise and resentment had been too genuine. And the staff of the hospital could not possibly put on such an act for one patient, for Marda West alone—the expense would be too great. The fault must lie in the lenses, then. The lenses, by their very nature, by some quality beyond the layman's understanding, must transform the person who was perceived through them.

A sudden thought struck her, and pushing the trolley table aside, she climbed out of bed and went over to the dressing table. Her own face stared back at her from the looking glass. The dark lenses concealed the eyes, but the face was at least her own.

Thank heaven for that, she said to herself, but it swung her back to thoughts of trickery. That her own face should seem unchanged through the lenses suggested a plot and that her first idea of masks had been the right one. But why? What did they gain by it? Could there be a conspiracy amongst them to drive her mad? She dis-

missed the idea at once—it was too fanciful. This was a reputable London nursing home, and the staff was well known. The surgeon had operated on royalty. Besides, if they wanted to send her mad, or kill her even, it would be simple enough with drugs. Or with anesthetics. They could have given her too much anesthetic during the operation and just let her die. No one would take the round-about way of dressing up staff and doctors in animals' masks.

She would try one further proof. She stood by the window, the curtain concealing her, and watched for passersby. For the moment there was no one in the street. It was the lunch hour and traffic was slack. Then, at the other end of the street, a taxi crossed, too far away for her to see the driver's head. She waited. The porter came out from the nursing home and stood on the steps, looking up and down. His boar's head was clearly visible. He did not count, though. He could be part of the plot. A van drew near, but she could not see the driver . . . yes, he slowed as he went by the nursing home and craned from his seat, and she saw the squat frog's head, the bulging eyes.

Sick at heart, she left the window and climbed back into bed. She had no further appetite and pushed away her plate, the rest of the chicken untasted. She did not ring her bell, and after a while the door opened. It was not the kitten. It was the little maid with the weasel's head.

"Will you have plum tart or ice cream, madam?" she asked.

Marda West, her eyes half closed, shook her head. The weasel, shyly edging forward to take the tray, said, "Cheese, then, and coffee to follow?"

The head joined the neck without any fastening. It could not be a mask, unless some designer, some genius, had invented masks that merged with the body, blending fabric to skin.

"Coffee only," said Marda West.

The weasel vanished. Another knock on the door and the kitten was back again, her back arched, her fluff flying. She plonked the coffee down without a word, and Marda West, irritated—for surely, if anyone was to show annoyance, it should be herself?—said sharply, "Shall I pour you some milk in the saucer?"

The kitten turned. "A joke's a joke, Mrs. West," she said, "and I can take a laugh with anyone. But I can't stick rudeness."

"Miaow," said Marda West.

The kitten left the room. No one, not even the weasel, came to remove the coffee. The patient was in disgrace. She did not care.

If the staff of the nursing home thought they could win this battle, they were mistaken. She went to the window again. An elderly cod, leaning on two sticks, was being helped into a waiting car by the boar-headed porter. It could not be a plot. They could not know she was watching them. Marda went to the telephone and asked the exchange to put her through to her husband's office. She remembered a moment afterwards that he would still be at lunch. Nevertheless, she got the number, and as luck had it he was there.

"Jim . . . Jim, darling."

"Yes?"

The relief to hear the loved familiar voice. She lay back on the bed, receiver to her ear.

"Darling, when can you get here?"

"Not before this evening, I'm afraid. It's one hell of a day, one thing after another. Well, how did it go? Is everything okay?"

"Not exactly."

"What do you mean? Can't you see? Greaves hasn't bungled it, has he?"

How was she to explain what had happened to her? It sounded so foolish over the telephone.

"Yes, I can see. I can see perfectly. It's just that . . . that all the nurses look like animals. And Greaves, too. He's a fox terrier. One of those little Jack Russels they put down the foxes' holes."

"What on earth are you talking about?"

He was saying something to his secretary at the same time, something about another appointment, and she knew from the tone of his voice that he was busy, very busy, and she had chosen the worst time to ring him up. "What do you mean about Jack Russell?" he repeated.

Marda West knew it was no use. She must wait till he came. Then she would try to explain everything, and he would be able to find out for himself what lay behind it.

"Oh, never mind," she said. "I'll tell you later."

"I'm sorry," he told her, "but I really am in a tearing hurry. If the lenses don't help you, tell somebody. Tell the nurses, the matron."

"Yes," she said, "yes."

Then she rang off. She put down the telephone. She picked up a magazine, one left behind at some time or other by Jim himself, she supposed. She was glad to find that reading did not hurt her eyes. Nor did the blue lenses make any difference, for the photographs of men and women looked normal, as they had always done.



Wedding groups, social occasions, debutantes, all were as usual. It was only here, in the nursing home itself and in the street outside, that they were different.

It was much later in the afternoon that Matron called in to have a word with her. She knew it was Matron because of her clothes. But inevitably now, without surprise, she observed the sheep's head.

"I hope you're quite comfortable, Mrs. West?"

A note of gentle inquiry in the voice. A suspicion of a baa?

"Yes, thank you."

Marda West spoke guardedly. It would not do to ruffle the matron. Even if the whole affair was some gigantic plot, it would be better not to aggravate her.

"The lenses fit well?"

"Very well."

"I'm so glad. It was a nasty operation, and you've stood the period of waiting so very well."

That's it, thought the patient. Butter me up. Part of the game, no doubt.

"Only a few days, Mr. Greaves said, and then you will have them altered and the permanent ones fitted."

"Yes, so he said."

"It's rather disappointing not to observe color, isn't it?"

"As things are, it's a relief."

The retort slipped out before she could check herself. The matron smoothed her dress. And if you only knew, thought the patient, what you look like, with that tape under your sheep's chin, you would understand what I mean.

"Mrs. West . . ." The matron seemed uncomfortable, and turned her sheep's head away from the woman in the bed. "Mrs. West, I hope you won't mind what I'm going to say, but our nurses do a fine job here, and we are all very proud of them. They work long hours, as you know, and it is not really very kind to mock them, although I am sure you intended it in fun."

Baa . . . baa . . . bleat away. Marda West tightened her lips.

"Is it because I called Nurse Sweeting a kitten?"

"I don't know what you called her, Mrs. West, but she was quite distressed. She came to me in the office nearly crying."

Spitting, you mean. Spitting and scratching. Those capable little hands are really claws.

"It won't happen again."

She was determined not to say more. It was not her fault. She had not asked for lenses that deformed, for trickery, for make-believe.

"It must come very expensive," she added, "to run a nursing home like this."

"It is," said the matron. Said the sheep. "It can only be done because of the excellence of the staff, and the cooperation of all our patients."

The remark was intended to strike home. Even a sheep can turn.

"Matron," said Marda West, "don't let's fence with each other. What's the object of it all?"

"The object of what, Mrs. West?"

"This tomfoolery, this dressing up." There, she had said it. To enforce her argument she pointed at the matron's cap. "Why pick on that particular disguise? It's not even funny."

There was silence. The matron, who had made as if to sit down to continue her chat, changed her mind. She moved slowly to the door.

"We, who were trained at St. Hilda's, are proud of our badge," she said. "I hope, when you leave us in a few days, Mrs. West, that you will look back on us with greater tolerance than you appear to have now."

She left the room. Marda West picked up the magazine she had thrown down, but the matter was dull. She closed her eyes. She opened them again. She closed them once more. If the chair had become a mushroom and the table a haystack, then the blame could have been put upon the lenses. Why was it only people who had changed? What was so wrong with people? She kept her eyes shut when her tea was brought her, and when the voice said pleasantly, "Some flowers for you, Mrs. West," she did not even open them, but waited for the owner of the voice to leave the room. The flowers were carnations. The card was Jim's. And the message on it said, "Cheer up. We're not as bad as we seem."

She smiled and buried her face in the flowers. Nothing false about them. Nothing strange about the scent. Carnations were carnations, fragrant, graceful. Even the nurse on duty who came to put them in water could not irritate her with her pony's head. After all, it was a trim little pony, with a white star on its forehead. It would do well in the ring. "Thank you," smiled Marda West.

The curious day dragged on, and she waited restlessly for eight o'clock. She washed and changed her nightgown and did her hair. She drew her own curtains and switched on the bedside lamp. A

strange feeling of nervousness had come upon her. She realized, so strange had been the day, that she had not once thought about Nurse Ansel. Dear, comforting, bewitching, Nurse Ansel. Nurse Ansel, who was due to come on duty at eight. Was she also in the conspiracy? If she was, then Marda West would have a showdown. Nurse Ansel would never lie. She would go up to her, and put her hands on her shoulders, and take the mask in her two hands, and say to her, "There, now take it off. You won't deceive me." But if it was the lenses, if all the time it was the lenses that were at fault, how was she going to explain it?

She was sitting at the dressing table, putting some cream on her face, and the door must have opened without her being aware, but she heard the well-known voice, the soft beguiling voice, and it said to her, "I nearly came before. I didn't dare. You would have thought me foolish." It slid slowly into view, the long snake's head, the twisting neck, the pointed barbed tongue swiftly thrusting and swiftly withdrawn, it came into view over her shoulders, through the looking glass.

Marda West did not move. Only her hand, mechanically, continued to cream her cheek. The snake was not motionless: it turned and twisted all the time, as though examining the pots of cream, the scent, the powder.

"How does it feel to see yourself again?"

Nurse Ansel's voice emerging from the head seemed all the more grotesque and horrible, and the very fact that as she spoke the darting tongue spoke, too, paralyzed action. Marda West felt sickness rise in her stomach, choking her, and suddenly physical reaction proved too strong. She turned away, but as she did so the steady hands of the nurse gripped her, she suffered herself to be led to her bed, she was lying down, eyes closed, the nausea passing.

"Poor dear, what have they been giving you? Was it the sedative? I saw it on your chart," said the gentle voice, so soothing and so calm it could only belong to one who understood. The patient did not open her eyes. She did not dare. She lay there on the bed, waiting.

"It's been too much for you," said the voice. "They should have kept you quiet the first day. Did you have visitors?"

"No."

"Nevertheless, you should have rested. You look really pale. We can't have Mr. West seeing you like this. I've half a mind to telephone him to stay away."

"No . . . please, I want to see him. I must see him."

Fear made her open her eyes, but directly she did so the sickness gripped her again, for the snake's head, longer than before, was twisting out of its nurse's collar, and for the first time she saw the hooded eye, a pin's head, hidden. She put her hand over her mouth to stifle her cry.

A sound came from Nurse Ansel expressing disquiet.

"Something has turned you very sick," she said. "It can't be the sedative. You've often had it before. What was the dinner this evening?"

"Steamed fish. I wasn't hungry."

"I wonder if it was fresh. I'll see if anyone else has complained. Meanwhile, lie still, dear, and don't upset yourself."

The door quietly opened and closed again, and Marda West, disobeying instructions, slipped from her bed and seized the first weapon that came to hand, her nail scissors. Then she returned to her bed again, her heart beating fast, the scissors concealed beneath the sheet. Revulsion had been too great. She must defend herself, should the snake approach her. Now she was certain that what was happening was real, was true. Some evil force encompassed the nursing home and its inhabitants, the matron, the nurses, the visiting doctors, her surgeon—they were all caught up in it, they were all partners in some gigantic crime, the purpose of which could not be understood. Here, in Upper Watling Street, the malevolent plot was in process of being hatched, and she, Marda West, was one of the pawns; in some way they were to use her as an instrument.

One thing was very certain. She must not let them know that she suspected them. She must try to behave with Nurse Ansel as she had done hitherto. One slip and she was lost. She must pretend to be better. If she let sickness overcome her, Nurse Ansel might bend over her with that snake's head, that darting tongue.

The door opened and she was back. Marda West clenched her hands under the sheet. Then she forced a smile.

"What a nuisance I am," she said. "I felt giddy, but I'm better now."

The gliding snake held a bottle in her hand. She came over to the washbasin and, taking the medicine glass, poured out three drops.

"This should settle it, Mrs. West," she said, and fear gripped the patient once again, for surely the words themselves constituted a threat. "This should settle it"—settle what? Settle her finish? The

liquid had no color, but that meant nothing. She took the medicine glass handed to her, and invented a subterfuge.

"Could you find me a clean handkerchief in there?"

"Of course."

The snake turned its head, and as it did so, Marda West poured the contents of the glass onto the floor. Then fascinated, repelled, she watched the twisting head peer into the contents of the dressing table drawer, search for a handkerchief, and bring it back again. Marda West held her breath as it drew near the bed, and this time she noticed that the neck was not the smooth glowworm neck that it had seemed on first encounter, but had scales upon it, zigzagged. Oddly, the nurse's cap was not ill-fitting. It did not perch incongruously as had the caps of kitten, sheep, and cow. She took the handkerchief.

"You embarrass me," said the voice, "staring at me so hard. Are you trying to read my thoughts?"

Marda West did not answer. The question might be a trap.

"Tell me," the voice continued, "are you disappointed? Do I look as you expected me to look?"

Still a trap. She must be careful. "I think you do," she said slowly, "but it's difficult to tell with the cap. I can't see your hair."

Nurse Ansel laughed, the low, soft laugh that had been so alluring during the long weeks of blindness. She put up her hands, and in a moment the whole snake's head was revealed, the flat, broad top, the telltale adder's V. "Do you approve?" she asked.

Marda West shrank back against her pillow. Yet once again she forced herself to smile.

"Very pretty," she said, "very pretty indeed."

The cap was replaced, the long neck wriggled, and then, deceived, it took the medicine glass from the patient's hand and put it back upon the washbasin. It did not know everything.

"When I go home with you," said Nurse Ansel, "I needn't wear uniform—that is, if you don't want me to. You see, you'll be a private patient then and I your personal nurse for the week I'm with you."

Marda West felt suddenly cold. In the turmoil of the day she had forgotten the plans. Nurse Ansel was to be with them for a week. It was all arranged. The vital thing was not to show fear. Nothing must seem changed. And then, when Jim arrived, she would tell him everything. If he could not see the snake's head as she did—and indeed, it was possible that he would not, if her hypervi-

sion was caused by the lenses—he must just understand that for reasons too deep to explain she no longer trusted Nurse Ansel, could not, in fact, bear her to come home. The plan must be altered. She wanted no one to look after her. She only wanted to be home again with him.

The telephone rang on the bedside table, and Marda West seized it as she might seize salvation. It was her husband.

"Sorry to be late," he said. "I'll jump into a taxi and be with you right away. The lawyer kept me."

"Lawyer?" she asked.

"Yes, Forbes and Millwall, you remember, about the trust fund." She had forgotten. There had been so many financial discussions before the operation. Conflicting advice, as usual, and finally Jim had put the whole business into the hands of the Forbes and Millwall people.

"Oh yes. Was it satisfactory?"

"I think so. Tell you directly."

He rang off, and looking up, she saw the snake's head watching her. No doubt, thought Marda West, no doubt you would like to know what we were saying to one another.

"You must promise not to get too excited when Mr. West comes." Nurse Ansel stood with her hand upon the door.

"I'm not excited. I just long to see him, that's all."

"You're looking very flushed."

"It's warm in here."

The twisting neck craned upward, then turned to the window. For the first time Marda West had the impression that the snake was not entirely at its ease. It sensed tension. It knew, it could not help but know, that the atmosphere had changed between nurse and patient.

"I'll open the window just a trifle at the top."

If you were all snake, thought the patient, I could push you through. Or would you coil yourself round my neck and strangle me?

The window was opened, and pausing a moment, hoping perhaps for a word of thanks, the snake hovered at the end of the bed. Then the neck settled in the collar, the tongue darted rapidly in and out, and with a gliding motion Nurse Ansel left the room.

Marda West waited for the sound of the taxi in the street outside. She wondered if she could persuade Jim to stay the night in the nursing home. If she explained her fear, her terror, surely he would

understand. She would know in an instant if he had sensed anything wrong himself. She would ring the bell, make a pretext of asking Nurse Ansel some question, and then, by the expression on his face, by the tone of his voice she would discover whether he saw what she saw herself.

The taxi came at last. She heard it slow down, and then the door slammed and, blessedly, Jim's voice rang out in the street below. The taxi went away. He would be coming up in the lift. Her heart began to beat fast, and she watched the door. She heard his footstep outside, and then his voice again—he must be saying something to the snake. She would know at once if he had seen the head. He would come into the room either startled, not believing his eyes, or laughing, declaring it a joke, a pantomime. Why did he not hurry? Why must they linger there, talking, their voices hushed?

The door opened, the familiar umbrella and bowler hat the first objects to appear round the corner, then the comforting burly figure, but—God . . . no . . . please God, not Jim too, not Jim, forced into a mask, forced into an organization of devils, of liars . . . Jim had a vulture's head. She could not mistake it. The brooding eye, the bloodtipped beak, the flabby folds of flesh. As she lay in sick and speechless horror, he stood the umbrella in a corner and put down the bowler hat and the folded overcoat.

"I gather you're not too well," he said, turning his vulture's head and staring at her, "feeling a bit sick and out of sorts. I won't stay long. A good night's rest will put you right."

She was too numb to answer. She lay quite still as he approached the bed and bent to kiss her. The vulture's beak was sharp.

"It's reaction, Nurse Ansel says," he went on, "the sudden shock of being able to see again. It works differently with different people. She says it will be much better when we get you home."

We . . . Nurse Ansel and Jim. The plan still held, then.

"I don't know," she said faintly, "that I want Nurse Ansel to come home."

"Not want Nurse Ansel?" He sounded startled. "But it was you who suggested it. You can't suddenly chop and change."

There was no time to reply. She had not rung the bell, but Nurse Ansel herself came into the room. "Cup of coffee, Mr. West?" she said. It was the evening routine. Yet tonight it sounded strange, as though it had been arranged outside the door.



"Thanks, nurse, I'd love some. What's this nonsense about not coming home with us?" The vulture turned to the snake, the snake's head wriggled, and Marda West knew, as she watched them, the snake with the darting tongue, the vulture with his head hunched between his man's shoulders, that the plan for Nurse Ansel to come home had not been her own after all; she remembered now that the first suggestion had come from Nurse Ansel herself. It had been Nurse Ansel who had said that Marda West needed care during convalescence. The suggestion had come after Jim had spent the evening laughing and joking, and his wife had listened, her eyes bandaged, happy to hear him. Now, watching the smooth snake whose adder's V was hidden beneath the nurse's cap, she knew why Nurse Ansel wanted to return with her, and she knew too why Jim had not opposed it, why in fact he had accepted the plan at once, had declared it a good one.

The vulture opened its bloodstained beak. "Don't say you two have fallen out?"

"Impossible." The snake twisted its neck, looked sideways at the vulture, and added, "Mrs. West is just a little bit tired tonight. She's had a trying day, haven't you, dear?"

How best to answer? Neither must know. Neither the vulture, nor the snake, nor any of the hooded beasts surrounding her and closing in must ever guess, must ever know.

"I'm all right," she said. "A bit mixed up. As Nurse Ansel says, I'll be better in the morning."

The two communicated in silence, sympathy between them. That, she realized now, was the most frightening thing of all. Animals, birds, and reptiles had no need to speak. They moved, they looked, they knew what they were all about. They would not destroy her, though. She had, for all her bewildered terror, the will to live.

"I won't bother you," said the vulture, "with these documents tonight. There's no violent hurry anyway. You can sign them at home."

"What documents?"

If she kept her eyes averted she need not see the vulture's head. The voice was Jim's, steady and reassuring.

"The trust fund papers Forbes and Millwall gave me. They suggest I should become a codirector of the fund."

The words struck a chord, a thread of memory belonging to the weeks before her operation. Something to do with her eyes. If the

operation was not successful she would have difficulty in signing her name.

"What for?" she asked, her voice unsteady. "After all, it is my money."

He laughed. And, turning to the sound, she saw the beak open. It gaped like a trap and then closed again.

"Of course it is," he said. "That's not the point. The point is that I should be able to sign for you if you should be ill or away."

Marda West looked at the snake, and the snake, aware, shrank into its collar and slid towards the door. "Don't stay too long, Mr. West," murmured Nurse Ansel. "Our patient must have a real rest tonight."

She glided from the room, and Marda West was left alone with her husband. With the vulture.

"I don't propose to go away," she said, "or be ill."

"Probably not. That's neither here nor there. These fellows always want safeguards. Anyway, I won't bore you with it now."

Could it be that the voice was over-casual? That the hand, stuffing the document into the pocket of the greatcoat, was a claw? This was a possibility, a horror, perhaps, to come. The bodies changing, too, hands and feet becoming wings, claws, hooves, paws, with no touch of humanity left to the people about her. The last thing to go would be the human voice. When the human voice went, there would be no hope. The jungle would take over, multitudinous sounds and screams coming from a hundred throats.

"Did you really mean that," Jim asked, "about Nurse Ansel?"

Calmly she watched the vulture pare his nails. He carried a file in his pocket. She had never thought about it before—it was part of Jim, like his fountain pen and his pipe. Yet now there was reasoning behind it: a vulture needed sharp claws for tearing its victim.

"I don't know," she said. "It seemed to me rather silly to go home with a nurse, now that I can see again."

He did not answer at once. The head sank deeper between the shoulders. His dark city suit was like the humped feathers of a large brooding bird. "I think she's a treasure," he said. "And you're bound to feel groggy at first. I vote we stick to the plan. After all, if it doesn't work we can always send her away."

"Perhaps," said his wife.

She was trying to think if there was anyone left whom she could trust. Her family was scattered. A married brother in South Africa,

friends in London, no one with whom she was intimate. Not to this extent. No one to whom she could say that her nurse had turned into a snake, her husband into a vulture. The utter hopelessness of her position was like damnation itself. This was her hell. She was quite alone, coldly conscious of the hatred and cruelty about her.

"What will you do this evening?" she asked quietly.

"Have dinner at the club, I suppose," he answered. "It's becoming rather monotonous. Only two more days of it, thank goodness. Then you'll be home again."

Yes, but once at home, once back there, with a vulture and a snake, would she not be more completely at their mercy than she was here?

"Did Greaves say Thursday for certain?" she asked.

"He told me so this morning when he telephoned. You'll have the other lenses then, the ones that show color."

The ones that would show the bodies, too. That was the explanation. The blue lenses only showed the heads. They were the first test. Greaves, the surgeon, was in this, too, very naturally. He had a high place in the conspiracy—perhaps he had been bribed. Who was it, she tried to remember, who had suggested the operation in the first place? Was it the family doctor, after a chat with Jim? Didn't they both come to her together and say that this was the only chance to save her eyes? The plot must lie deep in the past, extend right back through the months, perhaps the years. But, in heaven's name, for what purpose? She sought wildly in her memory to try to recall a look, or sign, or word which would give her some insight into this dreadful plot, this conspiracy against her person or her sanity.

"You look pretty peaky," he said suddenly. "Shall I call Nurse Ansel?"

"No . . ." It broke from her, almost a cry.

"I think I'd better go. She said not to stay long."

He got up from the chair, a heavy, hooded figure, and she closed her eyes as he came to kiss her goodnight: "Sleep well, my poor pet, and take it easy."

In spite of her fear she felt herself clutch at his hand.

"What is it?" he asked.

The well-remembered kiss would have restored her, but not the stab of the vulture's beak, the thrusting bloodstained beak. When he had gone, she began to moan, turning her head upon the pillow.

"What am I to do?" she said. "What am I to do?"

The door opened again, and she put her hand to her mouth. They must not hear her cry. They must not see her cry. She pulled herself together with a tremendous effort.

"How are you feeling, Mrs. West?"

The snake stood at the bottom of the bed, and by her side the house physician. She had always liked him, a young pleasant man, and although like the others he had an animal's head it did not frighten her. It was a dog's head, an Aberdeen's, and the brown eyes seemed to quiz her. Long ago, as a child, she had owned an Aberdeen.

"Could I speak to you alone?" she asked.

"Of course. Do you mind, nurse?" He jerked his head at the door, and she had gone. Marda West sat up in bed and clasped her hands.

"You'll think me very foolish," she began, "but it's the lenses. I can't get used to them."

He came over, the trustworthy Aberdeen, head cocked in sympathy.

"I'm sorry about that," he said. "They don't hurt you, do they?"

"No," she said, "no, I can't feel them. It's just that they make everyone look strange."

"They're bound to do that, you know. They don't show color." His voice was cheerful, friendly. "It comes as a bit of a shock when you've worn bandages so long," he said, "and you mustn't forget you were pulled about quite a bit. The nerves behind the eyes are still very tender."

"Yes," she said. His voice, even his head, gave her confidence. "Have you known people who've had this operation before?"

"Yes, scores of them. In a couple of days you'll be as right as rain." He patted her on the shoulder. Such a kindly dog. Such a sporting, cheerful dog, like the long-dead Angus. "I'll tell you another thing," he continued. "Your sight may be better after this than it's ever been before. You'll actually see more clearly in every way. One patient told me that it was as though she had been wearing spectacles all her life, and then, because of the operation, she realized she saw all her friends and her family as they really were."

"As they really were?" She repeated his words after him.

"Exactly. Her sight had always been poor, you see. She had thought her husband's hair was brown, but in reality it was red, bright red. A bit of a shock at first. But she was delighted."

The Aberdeen moved from the bed, patted the stethoscope on his jacket, and nodded his head. "Mr. Greaves did a wonderful job on you, I can promise you that," he said. "He was able to strengthen a nerve he thought had perished. You've never had the use of it before—it wasn't functioning. So who knows, Mrs. West, you may have made medical history. Anyway, sleep well and the best of luck. See you in the morning. Goodnight." He trotted from the room. She heard him call goodnight to Nurse Ansel as he went down the corridor.

The comforting words had turned to gall. In one sense they were a relief, because his explanation seemed to suggest there was no plot against her. Instead, like the woman patient before her with the deepened sense of color, she had been given vision. She used the words he had used himself. Marda West could see people as they really were. And those whom she had loved and trusted most were in truth a vulture and a snake. . . .

The door opened and Nurse Ansel, with the sedative, entered the room.

"Ready to settle down, Mrs. West?" she asked.

"Yes, thank you."

There might be no conspiracy, but even so all trust, all faith were over.

"Leave it with a glass of water. I'll take it later."

She watched the snake put the glass on the bedside table. She watched her tuck in the sheet. Then the twisting neck peered closer and the hooded eyes saw the nail scissors half hidden beneath the pillow.

"What have you got there?"

The tongue darted and withdrew. The hand stretched out for the scissors. "You might have cut yourself. I'll put them away, shall I, for safety's sake?"

Her one weapon was pocketed, not replaced on the dressing table. The very way Nurse Ansel slipped the scissors into her pocket suggested that she knew of Marda West's suspicions. She wanted to leave her defenseless.

"Now, remember to ring your bell if you want anything."

"I'll remember."

The voice that had once seemed tender was oversmooth and false. How deceptive are ears, thought Marda West, what traitors to truth. And for the first time she became aware of her own new latent power, the power to tell truth from falsehood, good from evil.

"Goodnight, Mrs. West."

"Goodnight."

Lying awake, her bedside clock ticking, the accustomed traffic sounds coming from the street outside, Marda West decided upon her plan. She waited until eleven o'clock, an hour past the time when she knew that all the patients were settled and asleep. Then she switched out her light. This would deceive the snake, should she come to peep at her through the window slide in the door. The snake would believe that she slept. Marda West crept out of bed. She took her clothes from the wardrobe and began to dress. She put on her coat and shoes and tied a scarf over her head. When she was ready she went to the door and softly turned the handle. All was quiet in the corridor. She stood there motionless. Then she took one step across the threshold and looked to the left, where the nurse on duty sat. The snake was there. The snake was sitting crouched over a book. The light from the ceiling shone upon her head, and there could be no mistake. There were the trim uniform, the white starched front, the stiff collar, but rising from the collar the twisting neck of the snake, the long, flat, evil head.

Marda West waited. She was prepared to wait for hours. Presently the sound she hoped for came, the bell from a patient. The snake lifted its head from the book and checked the red light on the wall. Then, slipping on her cuffs, she glided down the corridor to the patient's room. She knocked and entered. Directly she had disappeared Marda West left her own room and went to the head of the staircase. There was no sound. She listened carefully, and then crept downstairs. There were four flights, four floors, but the stairway itself was not visible from the cubbyhole where the night nurses sat on duty. Luck was with her.

Down in the main hall the lights were not so bright. She waited at the bottom of the stairway until she was certain of not being observed. She could see the night porter's back—his head was not visible, for he was bent over his desk—but when it straightened she noticed the broad fish face. She shrugged her shoulders. She had not dared all this way to be frightened by a fish. Boldly she walked through the hall. The fish was staring at her.

"Do you want anything, madam?" he said.

He was as stupid as she expected. She shook her head.

"I'm going out. Goodnight," she said, and she walked straight past him, out of the swing door, and down the steps into the street. She turned swiftly to the left and, seeing a taxi at the farther end,

called and raised her hand. The taxi slowed and waited. When she came to the door she saw that the driver had the squat black face of an ape. The ape grinned. Some instinct warned her not to take the taxi.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I made a mistake."

The grin vanished from the face of the ape. "Make up your mind, lady," he shouted, and let out his clutch and swerved away.

Marda West continued walking down the street. She turned right, and left, and right again, and in the distance she saw the lights of Oxford Street. She began to hurry. The friendly traffic drew her like a magnet, the distant lights, the distant men and women. When she came to Oxford Street she paused, wondering of a sudden where she could go, whom she could ask for refuge. And it came to her once again that there was no one, no one at all; because the couple passing her now, a toad's head on a short black body clutching a panther's arm, could give her no protection, and the policeman standing at the corner was a baboon, the woman talking to him a little prinked-up pig. No one was human, no one was safe, the man a pace or two behind her was like Jim, another vulture. There were vultures on the pavement opposite. Coming towards her, laughing, was a jackal.

She turned and ran. She ran, bumping into them, jackals, hyenas, vultures, dogs. The world was theirs, there was no human left. Seeing her run, they turned and looked at her, they pointed, they screamed and yapped, they gave chase, their footsteps followed her. Down Oxford Street she ran, pursued by them, the night all darkness and shadow, the light no longer with her, alone in an animal world.

"Lie quite still, Mrs. West, just a small prick, I'm not going to hurt you."

She recognized the voice of Mr. Greaves, the surgeon, and dimly she told herself that they had got hold of her again. She was back at the nursing home, and it did not matter now—she might as well be there as anywhere else. At least in the nursing home the animal heads were known.

They had replaced the bandages over her eyes, and for this she was thankful. Such blessed darkness, the evil of the night hidden.

"Now, Mrs. West, I think your troubles are over. No pain and no confusion with these lenses. The world's in color again."



The bandages were being lightened after all. Layer after layer removed. And suddenly everything was clear, was day, and the face of Mr. Greaves smiled down at her. At his side was a rounded, cheerful nurse.

"Where are your masks?" asked the patient.

"We didn't need masks for this little job," said the surgeon. "We were only taking out the temporary lenses. That's better, isn't it?"

She let her eyes drift round the room. She was back again all right. This was the shade, there was the wardrobe, the dressing table, the vases of flowers. All in natural color, no longer veiled. But they could not fob her off with stories of a dream. The scarf she had put round her head before slipping away in the night lay on the chair.

"Something happened to me, didn't it?" she said. "I tried to get away."

The nurse glanced at the surgeon. He nodded his head.

"Yes," he said, "you did. And, frankly, I don't blame you. I blame myself. Those lenses I inserted yesterday were pressing upon a tiny nerve, and the pressure threw out your balance. That's all over now."

His smile was reassuring. And the large warm eyes of Nurse Brand—it must surely be Nurse Brand—gazed down at her in sympathy.

"It was very terrible," said the patient. "I can never explain how terrible."

"Don't try," said Mr. Greaves. "I can promise you it won't happen again."

The door opened and the young physician entered. He, too, was smiling. "Patient fully restored?" he asked.

"I think so," said the surgeon. "What about it, Mrs. West?"

Marda West stared gravely at the three of them, Mr. Greaves, the house physician, and Nurse Brand and she wondered what palpitating wounded tissue could so transform three individuals into prototypes of an animal kingdom, what cell linking muscle to imagination.

"I thought you were dogs," she said. "I thought you were a hunt terrier, Mr. Greaves, and that you were an Aberdeen."

The house physician touched his stethoscope and laughed.

"But I am," he said, "it's my native town. Your judgment was not wholly out, Mrs. West. I congratulate you."

Marda West did not join in the laugh.

"That's all right for you," she said. "Other people were not so pleasant." She turned to Nurse Brand. "I thought you were a cow," she said, "a kind cow. But you had sharp horns."

This time it was Mr. Greaves who took up the laugh. "There you are, nurse," he said, "just what I've often told you. Time they put you out to grass and to eat the daisies."

Nurse Brand took it in good part. She straightened the patient's pillows and her smile was benign. "We get called some funny things from time to time," she said. "That's all part of our job."

The doctors were moving towards the door, still laughing, and Marda West, sensing the normal atmosphere, the absence of all strain, said, "Who found me, then? What happened? Who brought me back?"

Mr. Greaves glanced back at her from the door. "You didn't get very far, Mrs. West, and a damn good job for you, or you mightn't be here now. The porter followed you."

"It's all finished with now," said the house physician, "and the episode lasted five minutes. You were safely in your bed before any harm was done, and I was here. So that was that. The person who really had the full shock was poor Nurse Ansel when she found you weren't in your bed."

Nurse Ansel . . . The revulsion of the night before was not so easily forgotten. "Don't say our little starlet was an animal too?" smiled the house doctor.

Marda West felt herself color. Lies would have to begin. "No," she said quickly, "no, of course not."

"Nurse Ansel is here now," said Nurse Brand. "She was so upset when she went off duty that she wouldn't go back to the hostel to sleep. Would you care to have a word with her?"

Apprehension seized the patient. What had she said to Nurse Ansel in the panic and fever of the night? Before she could answer, the house doctor opened the door and called down the passage.

"Mrs. West wants to say good morning to you," he said. He was smiling all over his face. Mr. Greaves waved his hand and was gone, Nurse Brand went after him, and the house doctor, saluting with his stethoscope and making a mock bow, stepped back against the wall to admit Nurse Ansel. Marda West stared, then tremulously began to smile, and held out her hand.

"I'm sorry," she said, "you must forgive me."

How could she have seen Nurse Ansel as a snake! The hazel eyes, the clear olive skin, the dark hair trim under the frilled cap.

And that smile, that slow, understanding smile.

"Forgive you, Mrs. West?" said Nurse Ansel. "What have I to forgive you for? You've been through a terrible ordeal."

Patient and nurse held hands. They smiled at one another. And, oh heaven, thought Marda West, the relief, the thankfulness, the load of doubt and despair that were swept away with the newfound sight and knowledge.

"I still don't understand what happened," she said, clinging to the nurse. "Mr. Greaves tried to explain. Something about a nerve."

Nurse Ansel made a face towards the door. "He doesn't know himself," she whispered, "and he's not going to say either, or he'll find himself in trouble. He fixed those lenses too deep, that's all. Too near a nerve. I wonder it didn't kill you."

She looked down at her patient. She smiled with her eyes. She was so pretty, so gentle. "Don't think about it," she said. "You're going to be happy from now on. Promise me?"

"I promise," said Marda West.

The telephone rang, and Nurse Ansel let go her patient's hand and reached for the receiver. "You know who this is going to be," she said. "Your poor husband." She gave the receiver to Marda West.

"Jim . . . Jim, is that you?"

The loved voice sounding so anxious at the other end. "Are you all right?" he said. "I've been through to Matron twice, she said she would let me know. What the devil's been happening?"

Marda West smiled and handed the receiver to the nurse.

"You tell him," she said.

Nurse Ansel held the receiver to her ear. The skin of her hand was olive smooth, the nails gleaming with a soft pink polish.

"Is that you, Mr. West?" she said. "Our patient gave us a fright, didn't she?" She smiled and nodded at the woman in the bed. "Well, you don't have to worry any more. Mr. Greaves changed the lenses. They were pressing on a nerve, and everything is now all right. She can see perfectly. Yes, Mr. Greaves said we could come home tomorrow."

The endearing voice blended with the soft coloring, the hazel eyes. Marda West reached once more for the receiver.

"Jim, I had a hideous night," she said. "I'm only just beginning to understand it now. A nerve in the brain . . ."

"So I gather," he said. "How damnable. Thank God they traced it. That fellow Greaves can't have known his job."

"It can't happen again," she said. "Now the proper lenses are in, it can't happen again."

"It had better not," he said, "or I'll sue him. How are you feeling in yourself?"

"Wonderful," she said. "Bewildered but wonderful."

"Good girl," he said. "Don't excite yourself. I'll be along later."

His voice went. Marda West gave the receiver to Nurse Ansel, who replaced it on the stand.

"Did Mr. Greaves really say I could go home tomorrow?" she asked.

"Yes, if you're good." Nurse Ansel smiled and patted her patient's hand. "Are you sure you still want me to come with you?" she asked.

"Why, yes," said Marda West. "Why, it's all arranged."

She sat up in bed, and the sun came streaming through the window, throwing light on the roses, the lilies, the tall-stemmed iris. The hum of traffic outside was close and friendly. She thought of her garden waiting for her at home, and her own bedroom, her own possessions, the day-by-day routine of home to be taken up again with sight restored, the anxiety and fear of the past months put away forever.

"The most precious thing in the world," she said to Nurse Ansel, "is sight. I know now. I know what I might have lost."

Nurse Ansel, hands clasped in front of her, nodded her head in sympathy. "You've got your sight back," she said, "that's the miracle. You won't ever lose it now."

She moved to the door. "I'll slip back to the hostel and get some rest," she said. "Now I know everything is well with you I'll be able to sleep. Is there anything you want before I go?"

"Give me my face cream and my powder," said the patient, "and the lipstick and the brush and comb."

Nurse Ansel fetched the things from the dressing table and put them within reach upon the bed. She brought the hand mirror, too, and the bottle of scent, and with a little smile of intimacy sniffed at the stopper. "Gorgeous," she murmured. "This is what Mr. West gave you, isn't it?"

Already, thought Marda West, Nurse Ansel fitted in. She saw herself putting flowers in the small guest room, choosing the right books, fitting a portable wireless in case Nurse Ansel should be bored in the evening.

"I'll be with you at eight o'clock."

The familiar words, said every morning now for so many days and weeks, sounded in her ears like a melody, loved through repetition. At last they were joined to the individual, the person who smiled, the one whose eyes promised friendship and loyalty.

"See you this evening."

The door closed. Nurse Ansel had gone. The routine of the nursing home, broken by the fever of the night before, resumed its usual pattern. Instead of darkness, light. Instead of negation, life.

Marda West took the stopper from the scent bottle and put it behind her ears. The fragrance filtered, becoming part of the warm, bright day. She lifted the hand mirror and looked into it. Nothing changed in the room, the street noises penetrated from outside, and presently the little maid who had seemed a weasel yesterday came in to dust the room. She said, "Good morning," but the patient did not answer. Perhaps she was tired. The maid dusted and went her way.

Then Marda West took up the mirror and looked into it once more. No, she had not been mistaken. The eyes that stared back at her were doe's eyes, wary before sacrifice, and the timid deer's head was meek, already bowed.

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*(continued from page 4)*

lished "For the Taking" in November 1986 and "Hit Man" in June 1987.) Mr. Pizzo, who grew up in New Jersey but has lived in northern California for many years, is a title officer for

a title insurance company; he has also put in much time as a petroleum landman (buying oil and gas leases), has worked in canneries, driven a bus, sold things, gardens, and plays chess.

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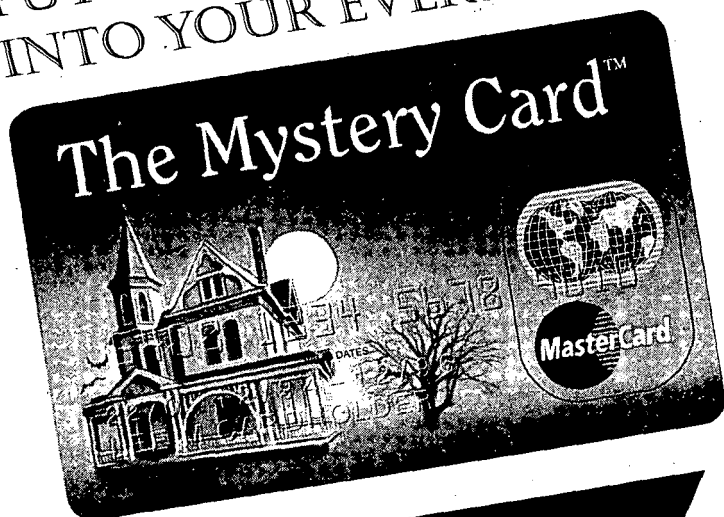
by Mary Cannon



**E**dith Skom was nominated for three mystery awards for her first Professor Beth Austin adventure, *The Mark Twain Murders*. In this second entry, **The George Eliot Murders** (Delacorte, \$19.95), she abandons the ivy-covered ivory towers of academia and treats her heroine to orchid-laden lanais. Beth plans a sybaritic midterm vacation at a posh oceanside Hawaiian resort, but there's trouble in paradise. She soon teams up with two other guests—a handsome bestselling novelist and an engaging retired lawyer—to find out whodunit. The George Eliot connection is somewhat tenuous, actually, but Skom's portrayal of the hotel staff and a group of guest “regulars” does create the kind of microcosm explored in the novels of manners so dear to the hearts of writers and readers of Eliot's era.

British author Liza Cody is best known for her Anna Lee mysteries, especially now that cable TV is dramatizing the young British private eye's cases. **Monkey Wrench** (Mysterious Press, \$18.95) is the second in a startlingly original series narrated by a young woman who occasionally does work for Anna. But Eva Wylie is her own woman; her voice is unlike anyone else's. Possessing neither intelligence nor the security of family nor good looks, Eva spent her adolescence surviving on London's streets. By sheer strength of will she had forged a life for herself, and she's fiercely proud of it. She shares free digs with two guard dogs in exchange for night security work, and she has trained to become a part-time professional wrestler billed as “The London Lassassin.” Having made her unique declaration of independence, Eva has chosen a solitary existence, and she's suspicious of anyone who tries to join her

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world. But all that changes the night a neighborhood prostitute is battered to death. Eva's narration is simultaneously hilarious and painful. It's like watching a particularly nasty pratfall: you can't take your eyes away from the victim any more than you can suppress hysterical giggles over his plight.

To date, Joan Hess has amused and entertained mystery readers with nine tales told by a droll Arkansas bookseller (and that's not to mention her Maggody books). She keeps up the good-natured work with **Busy Bodies** (Dutton, \$19.95). Claire Malloy's old schoolteacher drags her from her duties at the Book Depot to lend advice regarding the spinster's newest neighbor. Zeno Gorgias is a crazy young artist who's turned his newly inherited house on the teacher's block into a backdrop for what he calls "interactive environmental art." To his neighbors, the term means a yardful of junk, a half-dressed female assistant, and obscene noise over loudspeakers. The end result draws a crowd and manages to offend even the neighbors who *aren't* fundamentalists like the couple across the street. Malloy busies herself finding a murderer in between raising her precocious teenage daughter, avoiding the advice of her lover (a cop), and running the best little bookshop in Faberville—all while managing to have the last witty word. Malloy has more one-liners than a stand-up comedienne, and her sleuthing efforts are supported by a wickedly amusing cast.

Civil War expert James D. Brewer has turned his pen to a second Reconstruction mystery with **No Virtue** (Walker, \$19.95) again teaming up an injured Confederate soldier with a Yankee riverboat captain. It's 1873, and Captain Luke Williamson is navigating a paddlewheeler loaded with passengers and cargo down the perilous Mississippi when a body is spotted afloat near Memphis. The dead woman was a passenger, a "woman of no virtue" who occasionally worked the ship's cruises. The local police waste no time arresting Williamson's black first mate and longtime colleague. Forced to continue his voyage, Williamson hires out-of-work Masey Baldridge to get Jake Lusk cleared of the charge. Meanwhile, Baldridge is joined by a spunky prostitute who was a friend of the victim. Here's a chance to meet Jeff Davis, to learn about Confederate coins, and to get an insider's view of how complex relations actually were between whites and blacks in the post-Civil War South. Along the way, you can try to beat this unlikely team of sleuths to the solution.

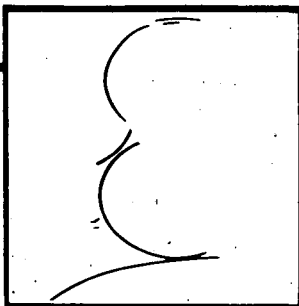
Fans of male private eye novels may be disappointed at the slim selection of such novels on bookstore shelves these days, but there's

good news: a new Elvis Cole case has just been published. Robert Crais' fifth novel in this series is **Voodoo River** (Hyperion, \$21.95), and it's teeming with eccentric Cajun characters, colorful bayou locales, and even exotic food. Elvis is hired by a Hollywood singer/actress whose new hit sitcom has made her an overnight celebrity. Jodi Taylor was born in Louisiana, but she was adopted in infancy. Elvis is asked to team up with a local woman attorney whom Jodi has contacted and locate the star's biological parents. But not to get in touch with them; Jodi wants to learn her medical history, no more. Elvis uncovers more secrets than anyone bargained for. Aided by the attractive lawyer and Joe Pike, his saturnine sidekick, he must pull off a risky caper in order to reveal some of the truth—and forever disguise the whole story. Look for great dialogue, scary action, a twisty plot, and lots of quality time with an irresistible private eye.

**Total Eclipse** (Pocket, \$22) by British author Liz Rigbey is a long novel of obsession and murder and ultimate deceit that will mesmerize some readers (especially with the astronomy info), but may leave others yawning if they've guessed the promised shock ending. Publicity blurbs compared this to Daphne Du Maurier's *Rebecca*; *My Cousin Rachel* would be more apropos. Lomax is a middle-aged, divorced astronomer, a loner happiest among the stars on night viewings at the Colorado mountaintop observatory where he's employed, but he's soon looking at reality through a kaleidoscope rather than a telescope. A beautiful young local widow named Julia is hired as a secretary. She and Lomax have just begun an affair when she is charged with brutally murdering her wealthy older husband and her adult stepdaughter some months earlier. Then Lomax makes a painful accusation against his old boss and mentor, and both men are forced to take leaves of absence. This opens the door for a new administrator, who plans to exploit the upcoming solar eclipse and turn the observatory into a tourist attraction. At loose ends, and certain of his lover's innocence, Lomax begins his own investigation to clear Julia. Along the way he encounters several memorable characters, and learns a truth about himself as well as the woman he loves.

# MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



**I**n the hard-nosed thriller **Kiss of Death**, David Caruso locks horns with Nicolas Cage and the audience comes out the winner.

The movie is loosely based on the 1947 film *noir* of the same name, which featured the film debut of Richard Widmark as a giggling psychokiller best remembered for shoving a wheelchair-bound woman down a flight of stairs.

Like the original, from a screenplay by Ben Hecht and Charles Lederer, the remake is the story of an ex-con betrayed by his criminal cronies who turns to the law to get revenge and straighten out his life.

Caruso, in his first big-screen role since leaving the hit TV series *NYPD Blue*, plays reformed car thief Jimmy Kilmartin, who now gets his kicks out of family life with his

wife Bev (Helen Hunt) and young daughter.

But the lure of the underworld proves too strong for Jimmy when his cousin Ronnie (Michael Rapaport) comes knocking on the door, desperate for someone to drive a truckful of hot cars to the dock for shipment overseas.

Jimmy thinks he's just doing a favor for his cousin, but the cops who cut short the stolen car scheme don't quite see it that way. Especially Calvin (Samuel L. Jackson), a cop who takes a bullet in the face during the bust.

The ill-fated driving gig shatters the domestic tranquility Jimmy has only recently achieved. He winds up doing hard time at Sing Sing, and when he's up for parole, the district attorney presses him to name names. The man the au-

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thorities target is gangster strongman Little Junior (Cage).

Cage is frightening and hilarious as the psychotic, asthmatic ringleader of a crew of auto thieves. He keeps in shape by bench-pressing a shapely dancer at his topless joint, Babycakes, and is so pumped up he looks like he could hold his own against any offensive line in the NFL. As usual for any character Cage plays, this one has his quirks. Little Junior is so over-the-top he would be right at home at a professional wrestling match. And when he complains that someone must have informed prison authorities that he doesn't like the taste of metal in his mouth because they didn't supply him with plastic forks and spoons, you get an idea of what an oddball this guy is.

Although Widmark's wheelchair scene is missing from this version, Cage's Little Junior offers his own contribution to murder in the movies. In one gangland hit Little Junior and his helpers don raincoats when he beats a man to death, to keep the blood from getting on their clothes.

Despite his menacing outlook and unlawful activities, Little Junior is something of a papa's boy. And when his father, the wonderfully named "Big Junior," dies, Little Junior takes it hard.

The redheaded Caruso shows he made the right decision in leaving his popular television series for the movies. As Jimmy he is a bundle of nervous energy, tightly wound and always twitching; he seems ready to go off at any moment. Even when he's with his little daughter he's on edge, worried that he'll lose her at any time.

The supporting players are first-rate, especially Samuel L. Jackson as the cop who torments but eventually befriends Kilmartin and Michael Rapaport as Jimmy's life-in-the-fast-lane car thief cousin.

Director Barbet Schroeder takes screenwriter Richard Price's gritty story and presents it in a no-nonsense fashion. The choice of filming in the real New York, instead of Hollywood's usual, less expensive Big Apple stand-in, Toronto, really paid off. The seedy, dangerous Brooklyn waterfront is rife with intrigue, and the auto salvage yards/chop shops hard in the shadow of Shea Stadium are authentic enough to make you want to wipe the bottoms of your shoes to get the grease and oil off.

*Kiss of Death* shines as a sophisticated nineties thriller, but it's really timeless. Of course, after you see how easy it is to steal a car, you might want to look into some extra security measures for your own.

# THE STORY THAT WON

The April Mysterious won by E. B. Parkell of Fairfax, Virginia; Fredington; Cecil T. Landry of Sed-Bawcom of Waco, Texas; R. P. Cooper of Westford, Massachusetts; Rob Hutchison of Estes Park, Colorado; William F. Smith of Garden Grove, California; and Kenneth Eaton, Jr., of Akron, Ohio.



Photograph contest was San Francisco, California; go to Art Cosing of Adair of Blaine, Washington; LaPlace, Louisiana; ona, Arizona; Amy M. Bawcom of Waco, Texas; R. P. Cooper of Westford, Massachusetts; Rob Hutchison of Estes Park, Colorado; William F. Smith of Garden Grove, California; and Kenneth Eaton, Jr., of Akron, Ohio.

## THE GARGOYLE by E. B. Parkell

Henri DuBois peered over the ledge of Notre Dame's north tower, his hands on the gargoyles, ready. He thought about his ex-business partner, Pierre Le Du, who had stolen the company from him, leaving him penniless. "You will pay, you slippery eel."

DuBois knew that Le Du attended mass at Notre Dame every Sunday. The past five nights, DuBois had sneaked onto the tower and painstakingly chiseled away at the gargoyles, eating only baguettes and fruit as he worked.

Finally the gargoyles were free, and DuBois waited. "Come on, slippery cheater. You stole my business; now you will die." Moments later the unmistakable gait of Le Du could be seen crossing the Place du Parvis. "Aha," DuBois said aloud, pushing at the heavy statue. It didn't budge.

"*Mon Dieu. C'est lourde.*" Again he pushed, and still it remained. In a desperate last attempt, he stepped back and, running toward the massive gargoyles, accidentally stepped on a banana peel and was propelled over the parapet.

Le Du was the first person to reach the dying Henri DuBois. "What happened, Henri?"

"You slippery cheat! You stole my business, so I tried to kill you with a gargoyles."

Le Du smiled. "You call me 'slippery,' but it is *you* who has banana peel on his shoe, monsieur. Besides, you are a worse criminal than I."

"How so, Le Du?"

Le Du smiled again. "*Mon ami*, perhaps I am a cheat. But you, you, Monsieur DuBois, are a *chiseler*."

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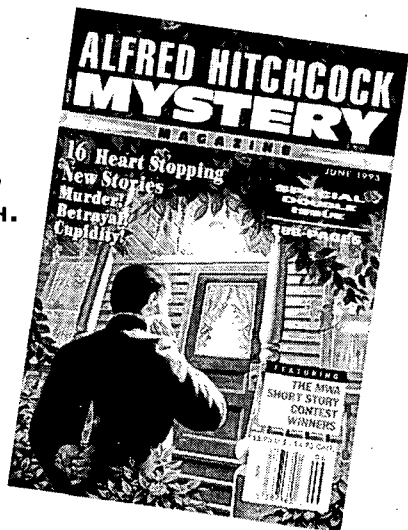
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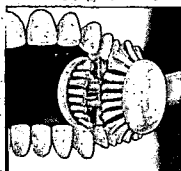
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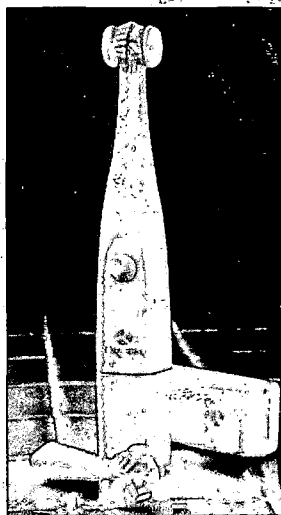
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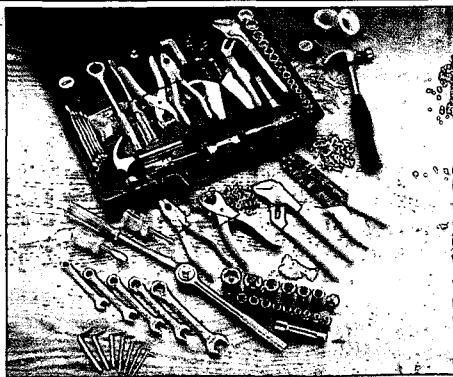
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